Are you man enough (to take the blame for this)
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Are you man enough (to take the blame for this)

by trash_meshe

Summary

Bucky and Steve have always been more than just childhood best friends. As teenagers, they finally start exploring their relationship more - except a girl suddenly shows interest in Steve, crumbling the entire foundation of their fragile... whatever they have.

Or: Sixty-two days. Two seventeen-year-olds. Love on the edge, misery, and absolutely devastating angst.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

> If you found this through my TikTok or Instagram post, hi and welcome! And if you somehow ended up here by accident, hi and welcome to you too! This is my first ever more serious fanfic, and probably the first project I've actually finished... Before we start, I'd like to remind you to carefully read the tags. While the story begins on a soft note, I can already say that it won't stay that way for very long. If I'm missing any warning tags, please feel free to leave me a comment. I really appreciate feedback in general :) I'll also do my best to include content warnings in the author's notes for heavier chapters. And remember: if you feel uncomfortable or triggered at any point, you're absolutely free to skip ahead to the part where the heavier content ends.
>
> Now, a little self-advertisement in case you don't know me yet :)
> Visit my social media for Bucky edits or extra cutesy stucky ones (especially the pinned edit for this fanfic I made!)
> Tiktok: @meshe.fx
> Instagram (for updates!): @meshe.fx

Wednesday, April 20th, 1940 - 62 days left

Steve sat at the table beneath the buzzing overhead bulb, the pale yellow phone pulled taut on its cord. The receiver was hot against his ear, his fingers curling tight around it as he kept glancing at his watch. Ten minutes. That was the limit. Any longer and his mother would be hit in the face with a bill she couldn't afford to pay. She was, as usual, on a late shift at the hospital again, patching up the city while her teenage son kept things running at home.

The sink behind his back had a crack the size of a coin, and the floor under his feet was covered in scuffed yellow linoleum that always looked dirty even after it was freshly mopped. A thin hallway connected to the kitchen archway and the living room. Though the living room was really just a narrow space with an ancient couch, a faded red rug, and the gray old curtain his mom had nailed up to separate her bed from the rest of the room. Behind that curtain was the storage room, lined with shelves holding jars and tins of food right next to her metal bedframe.

"...so tomorrow, after my chores," Bucky was saying, his voice lively,

full of that careless confidence Steve never quite managed. “Ma’ll have my ass if I don’t help her with the household, but once I’m free? You gotta come by. Dad finally helped me fix up my radio. And I picked up this new comic yesterday. Some crazy thing with spacemen and aliens. You’ll love it, man.”

Steve smiled, his thumb rubbing at a crack in the table. “Bet you already started reading it without me.”

“‘Course I did. But don’t worry, pal, I saved the end for us to read together.”

It was always like that with Bucky. Easy, generous words that sounded like promises, though Steve knew better than to hold onto them too tightly. You always just ended up getting disappointed. He’d been hanging off Bucky’s words since they were still wearing diapers, since Bucky had first saved him from a schoolyard fight. Some boys grew apart, but not them. Never them. But as they’d gotten older, whatever they were… It had grown complicated.

Steve had always been more serious about it than Bucky. That much was clear. When they stole moments together, sitting too close on a porch after dark, hands brushing and lingering, sometimes lips too, rushed and heated, as though they were afraid of being caught. It had meant the world to Steve. But Bucky? Bucky still carried himself like the same golden boy of the block, charming the panties off every girl who glanced his way. He never denied Steve those touches, but he never spoke of them, either.

Steve cleared his throat. “How’s your dad? Haven’t seen his car today when I passed your house.”

Bucky paused a moment before answering, his tone slipping into something casual. “Busy, like always. Some office thing. When he came back, I was already out, though. Met up with a few of the fellas after school. Grabbed sodas. Thought maybe you’d tag along, but you had your hands full, huh?”

“Groceries,” Steve said simply, a little sharper than he meant. “And laundry. Needed to get it done before Ma gets home.”

Bucky’s voice softened. “Yeah, I figured. Nothin’ wrong with that, pal.” Then, with a smile audible even across the line, he added, “You didn’t miss much. Doyle was there. Richie. You know how he is, always got a bunch of girls hangin’ off him. Swear the guy only has to grin, and they all go weak at the knees.”

Steve rolled his eyes, though his chest tightened. “That’s Richie for you.”

“And, don’t laugh, but I had Dot and Evie with us, too. Even Peggy Carter dropped by for a soda. Can you believe that?”

Steve’s breath caught. His jaw tightened, and he sat up straighter in his chair. “Peggy Carter? The new girl?”

“Yeah, why?”

Steve’s voice came out sharper than he intended. “Didn’t think she ran with your crowd.”

Bucky chuckled. “Guess she does now. Don’t tell me you’re jealous, Stevie. It was just sodas.”

Steve’s free hand curled into a fist on the table. He couldn’t help it. The thought of Bucky leaning in close to Peggy, flashing that grin, made his stomach twist. “I’m not jealous,” he snapped. “I just don’t see why you have to talk about every girl you look at.”

On the other end of the line, Bucky went quiet. When he spoke again, his voice was lower. “Hey. Don’t blow your top, alright? You know none of that means a thing.” A pause. Then, with a kind of steady warmth only Bucky managed, he spoke again. “You’re my best guy. Always will be.”

Best guy.

Ouch.

Steve swallowed hard. That wasn’t enough, not for him, not when every brush of Bucky’s hand, every stolen kiss, felt like fire in his veins. But he couldn’t say that. Not in 1940. Not when people like them weren’t supposed to want what they wanted.

Bucky sighed on the line. “Look, just come by tomorrow after church. I’ll show you the radio, the comic. We’ll waste the whole afternoon. Forget about Peggy, forget about Richie. You and me, that’s what matters.”

Steve’s eyes flicked again to the watch on his wrist. Nine minutes gone. His chest ached, not from the asthma for once, but from the simple truth that he never wanted to hang up. He never wanted to stop listening to Bucky’s voice.

"…Alright," he whispered finally. "I'll be there. See you tomorrow."

—

The pills rattled quietly in the neon orange tin box as Steve tipped two into his palm. He stood crouched over the sink. The kitchen tap groaned before spitting out a thin stream of cold water, and he swallowed the medicine quickly, one after the other. His throat clenched around the bitterness, and for a moment, his reflection in the darkened window looked older than seventeen. The bony cheekbones, pale skin, blue eyes always framed red from lack of good sleep.

The medicine never worked like it promised. It dulled the ache in his chest, took the harshness off the pain along his back, but it never really left him whole. His scoliosis had been at the top of the list of doctor notes. Just the tip of the iceberg of whatever the hell was wrong with him. Honestly, he sometimes questioned what wasn't wrong with him instead. Maybe that list would be shorter. Still, he'd learned to live with it. Learned to hide the grimace when he bent down and learned how to tie his shoelaces without anyone noticing the wince.

"Steve?"

The voice came from the living room, his mother's voice, tired but warm. Sarah Rogers sat in her usual place, the old armchair angled toward the second-hand television they'd bought used last year. The black-and-white picture fuzzed every few minutes, but it was enough to fill the silence of the apartment. Tonight, a reporter's serious voice was talking about Europe again. Hitler, troops marching across borders, names of places Steve had never heard of before, and couldn't even pronounce. His mother half-listened, half-counted stitches, the needles clicking softly as her hands worked with practiced ease at her latest knitting project.

She looked older than she was. Her hair, still blonde, was tied back loosely, but the strands at her temples had begun to silver. Lines stretched from her eyes and mouth, not formed over time by laughter but by long shifts at the hospital, years of exhaustion. And yet, when she glanced up at her boy, her smile was gentle as ever, the kind of smile that never failed to make Steve feel loved.

"Done with your medicine?"

Steve nodded. "Yeah, Ma."

“Good. Get some rest then. You’ve been up on your feet all day.”

He crossed the room, bent down, and pressed a kiss to her temple. She smelled faintly of soap while the scent of the hospital air still lingered, even though she’d changed into a plain house dress by now. She squeezed his hand briefly, her skin rough from years of work.

“Goodnight, sweetheart.”

“’Night, Ma.”

He left her there with her knitting and the glow of the television, her figure small but radiating with her motherly warmth, he still craved even at seventeen.

Steve’s room was barely larger than someone’s modest bathroom. The wallpaper had peeled long ago in some spots, the plaster beneath showing faint cracks. His narrow bed was pushed against the far wall, sheets patched where they’d torn. A flimsy dresser stood beside it, its drawers painted blue. On the bedside table, an old glass of water and a tin of pills sat within easy reach. A single framed photograph rested against the wall, a picture of him as a toddler with his mother holding him close, both of them smiling. His father wasn’t in it.

His father never was.

The man had left before Steve was old enough to remember him properly. All he left was the feeling of abandonment. Now he was somewhere in California with a new wife and, Steve supposed, new children, healthy ones with strong lungs and straight spines. Sometimes Steve thought about him at night, not with longing but with a dull anger, the kind that never went away. His mother deserved better. She deserved rest, comfort, someone to carry the weight with her. Instead, she had him, her sickly, too-thin boy who caused her more worry than joy.

Steve lay back on the bed, the bedframe creaking beneath his weight. He positioned his head on his pillow. The glass of water caught the glow of the streetlamp filtering in through the thin curtain.

Sleep didn’t come. It never did. At least not right away. The pain in his chest was quieter but still there, a reminder with every beat that he wasn’t like the other boys at school. He stared at the cracked ceiling, thoughts drifting to Bucky.

James Buchanan Barnes.

His anchor, his shield, his closest friend. The one who had always stepped in when fists swung toward him, who had always made sure he socialised and didn't miss out on anything in the supposedly glorious years of being a careless teenager. And more than that, something they never spoke of, never dared to name.

The friendship had blurred years ago. In the way they lingered too long in each other's space, in the hurried kisses stolen on rooftops or alleyways, in the press of hands against their crotches. For Steve, every moment was meant more than words could ever describe. The way his chest tightened whenever Bucky laughed or his arm draped casually over Steve's shoulders.

For Bucky… it was harder to tell. He was always surrounded by girls, always letting himself be pulled into dances, into stolen glances across the high school's yard. He kissed them, too, Steve knew. Maybe not in the same way he kissed Steve, but he didn't turn it away. He didn't hide it. With Steve, though, he hid everything, locked it away under that easy smile, brushed it off with a laugh.

Steve turned on his side, the bed groaning. His hand brushed over his blond hair before he pulled the thin blanket tighter around himself. The jealousy from earlier, the sharpness in his voice when Peggy Carter's name came up, still burned in his chest. He hated it, hated how much Bucky's attention to others could trigger him.

Hated how much he wanted to be the only one.

The reporter's voice still hummed faintly through the wall, talking of battles overseas, of nations falling like dominoes. Steve closed his eyes and let the sound blur into nothing, holding onto the image of Bucky's grin, the warmth of his voice through the phone.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow he'd see him.

Chapter 2: Chapter 2

Thursday, April 21st, 1940 - 61 days left

James Buchanan Barnes stood in front of the hall mirror, running his fingers through his thick, dark hair for the third time in a hopeless attempt to fix the mess. It was too long, messy the way it always got, and his mother would remind him, again and again, to get it trimmed.

Bucky grinned at his own reflection anyway, tugging at the collar of his button-down. He'd fished it out of the laundry bin, the wrinkles still clinging to the fabric. The sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, showing the wiry strength he'd built from working out every once in a while and helping his father around the house. His trousers were neat enough, navy blue, and comfy enough for hanging around at home. At seventeen, he stood tall and lean, six feet if he stretched his back straight, his build one of the few things he and Steve didn't share.

Half Romanian, half American, Bucky didn't feel any different from the other boys on the block. No one ever guessed his heritage on their own unless he chose to say something about it. He barely spoke his mother's native language and understood even less of it, the words awkward and unfamiliar on his tongue. Valeria Barnes had been careful about that. She'd made sure her children blended in, that they sounded and moved and lived like everyone else around them. Fitting in had always been the goal.

His older sister, Rebecca, had taken to the goal more willingly. She was one year older than Bucky and had grown into her mother's image. Neat, proper, disciplined. Straight-A student, always dolled up, already being whispered about as "wife material." She barely tolerated Bucky's antics these days, rolling her eyes whenever he talked about comics or cracked jokes at dinner. Once, they'd been close. Now, she thought he was "cringe," as she put it.

The doorbell rang.

Bucky jogged down the stairs two at a time, the walls lined with family photographs watching him go. His young father in uniform from the Great War, his mother young and glowing at their wedding, young Becca holding a doll in the backyard swing, and baby him in short pants grinning at the camera. The Barnes house smelled like a cozy afternoon. Fresh bread, coffee, and a hint of onions frying in the kitchen for whatever his mom was making for lunch. Their block was

quieter, nicer than most, with two cars in the driveway, flowers blooming in the front yard where his mother had spent hours planting tulips.

He swung the door open, and there stood Steve Rogers. Smaller, scrawnier, blond hair catching the sun. Steve's thin shoulders were drawn up, his posture always trying not to reveal how fragile his body really was. But his eyes, clear, stubborn blue, met Bucky's with that familiar mix of fondness and something else Bucky couldn't quite put his finger on.

"Hey, Stevie," Bucky said, grinning as he stepped aside.

Steve slipped off his shoes without needing to be told. Shoes in the house were a reason for war with Valeria Barnes. He set them neatly on the hallway shelf, straightening his socks before looking up.

"Hi, Mrs. Barnes," Steve called politely into the kitchen.

Bucky's mom turned from the stove, a wooden spoon in her hand. Her hair was dark, pinned back neatly, though a few strands had escaped to frame her sharp cheekbones. Her eyes, the same piercing blue as her son's, softened when she saw Steve. She looked younger than her thirty-some years, but there was a firmness about her, a posture that spoke of discipline and tradition. Her voice carried the faintest trace of Romania, though decades in America had polished it smooth.

"Hello, Steve," she said warmly. "You are thin. I will send food for you to take home before you leave."

Steve flushed, ducking his head. "That's very kind, ma'am."

Bucky rolled his eyes fondly. "Mama, don't embarrass him." He jerked his head toward the staircase. "C'mon, Steve."

Upstairs, his room was exactly the way he liked it, even if his mother nagged about the state of it. Blue-painted walls with old posters from those science magazines he loved, a king-sized bed shoved against the wall, sheets crumpled from last night. A bookshelf full of comics, books, and novels. His dresser and a full-length mirror stood opposite, the laundry bin in the corner spilling with shirts and trousers.

Bucky flopped onto the bed, grabbing the recently fixed radio from his nightstand and clicking it on. Jazz spilled into the room, low and crackling. He looked up at Steve, who awkwardly stood by the shelf.

“Got that comic I told you about,” Bucky said, tossing it toward him. “Space adventure. Guy with a ray gun bigger than his arm.”

Steve caught it, but his smile didn’t reach his eyes. He finally sank onto the edge of the bed, flipping the comic open without really looking. His shoulders were stiff, his mouth set.

Bucky watched him for a beat, frowning. “You’re quiet today.”

“Just tired,” Steve muttered.

“Stevie.” Bucky nudged him with his knee. “Talk to me. You’ve been bitter since last night. What’s eatin’ at you?”

Steve’s fingers tightened around the comic. He didn’t look up. “You know what it is.”

Bucky sat up, leaning forward. “It was just sodas, Steve. You don’t gotta get worked up every time I talk to a girl.”

Steve’s eyes snapped up, sharp with jealousy and hurt. “You don’t get it, do you? It’s not just sodas to me. You go around smiling at every girl in Brooklyn, and then… and then you come to me like it means the same. But it doesn’t. Not to me.”

The words hung heavily between them.

Bucky’s smile faded. He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to figure out how things had escalated so quickly. It wasn’t the first time Steve had brought this up, and it wasn’t the first time the blond boy had snapped at him for being a ladies’ man.

Bucky honestly didn’t understand the problem. Or maybe he did, and just didn’t know what to do with it. God, he barely understood his own feelings. He didn’t know what to call the thing he and Steve had. He only knew that he wanted it. Wanted Steve close, wanted the way Steve looked at him like he was more than just another boy.

But he wanted the rest, too. The freedom. The easy laughter. The girls. The normalcy everyone expected from him. He couldn’t imagine saying any of this out loud. Not in 1940. Not with his father already planning his future in the Army, not with his mother hoping he’d someday marry a nice girl and settle into a life that looked respectable from the outside.

But looking at Steve now, at all the emotions in his eyes, at the way

his hands trembled just slightly around the comic, Bucky couldn't stand the tenseness in the air.

"Steve," he said quietly.

Then, softer. "C'mere."

Steve blinked, confused. Bucky closed the space himself, leaning forward until their foreheads brushed. The tension in the air softened, and before Steve could protest, Bucky pressed his mouth to his.

It was familiar, the way it always was. The quick thrill, the sting of guilt buried under it, the relief of having Steve close. Steve resisted for only a moment, his hands balled at his sides, before he gave in, kissing back like he'd been waiting for this all day. Well, to be fair, he had been waiting for days…

Bucky's hand came up, cupping the side of Steve's jaw, his thumb brushing the sharp line of his cheekbone. He kissed him again, deeper this time, trying to kiss away the tenseness in the boy's expression.

When Steve pulled back, his chest rose and fell unevenly, his lips parted. His eyes searched Bucky's face, as though waiting for words Bucky still didn't have the courage to say.

Instead, Bucky leaned back on his bed, forcing a grin. "See? Told you. Nothin' to worry about, punk."

Steve's facial expression was something between desire and frustration, but he didn't move away, the comic forgotten on the bed. "Didn't feel like 'nothing' yesterday on the phone," he said, voice low.

Bucky's face softened. His lips were still pink and slightly swollen from the kiss. He pushed the bottom one out and bit it for a moment, like a boy stalling for time. Silence settled between them. The only sound now was the radio still playing jazz on the bedside table. Bucky hesitated, considering his next words with visible care.

Steve let out a breath and decided he was done waiting for the reply that never quite came. Bucky always had the right things to say. The easy lines that made Steve drop whatever uncomfortable topic he brought up. But tonight, Steve didn't want another excuse or a soft promise that those pretty girls Bucky loved charming didn't matter the way he did. They both already knew Bucky liked the attention. The way girls adored him, how it puffed up his chest and made him glow. It pushed his ego in ways that Steve never could.

“I don’t understand why you always do this to me, Bucky,” he said finally, not screaming but boldly enough to emphasize the seriousness of the situation.

Bucky tilted his head, tongue tracing his bottom lip before he cleared his throat. “Why are you so bothered? I always come back to you, don’t I?”

Steve shook his head slowly, the familiar ache spreading across his ribs. “No. You shamelessly flirt with those, awfully stunning, girls right in front of me. You run after them, and then you come back when you get bored.”

“I come back when I want you,” Bucky said, voice urgent. “You make me feel good, Stevie.”

“So you use me to feel better?”

The question immediately shut Bucky up. For the first time, the grin vanished entirely, and he stared at his hands, lips pressed into a thin line, eyes dropping to his lap. “That’s not what I meant,” he said after a long pause.

Steve exhaled, trying to steady himself. He had always been patient with Bucky. Forgiving, even, because he knew how complicated the boy’s life was. His mother’s rules, his father’s expectations… The idea of labeling anything about himself was something Bucky avoided. It was easier for him to drift, to joke, to keep both worlds open. But easier or not, it made Steve feel shitty.

“I get it,” Steve said, softer now, the rage leaving his voice. “This is messy. Maybe we shouldn’t do any of this. But if we’re going to, if we’re really doing it, then you have to stop with that bullshit. Prove it matters. Or we stop. Now. And we never-” He stopped, because the thought of walking away felt like ripping his own chest out.

Bucky looked up then, and something in his eyes had changed. They looked so glassy, so vulnerable. His overgrown bangs wiggled as he shook his head. “I don’t want to stop.”

The way he said it, so small, sincere, with those wide blue eyes and a voice that went soft at the edges… It made Steve’s jaw loosen. All the anger softened into something warmer.

“I don’t want it to stop either,” Steve admitted, and for a moment, they simply sat there.

Bucky was the first to move. He shifted closer, his knee touching Steve's, his hand sliding up to the back of Steve's neck. His touch was firm, the way it always was when Bucky pulled him into something reckless.

"C'mere," he whispered again, and Steve obeyed without thought, leaning into him.

Their mouths met once more, slower this time. Bucky's lips pressed against his with surprising softness. Steve's hand came up hesitantly, fingers catching the fabric of Bucky's shirt just above his chest. He didn't pull away. He couldn't.

When Bucky finally moved back, their foreheads rested together, breaths meeting in the narrow space between their faces. His grin was crooked, teasing, and there was a flicker of something playful in his eyes. "See? Told you, Stevie. You're the one I want around."

Steve swallowed hard, his chest tight. He wanted to argue, to demand more than a grin and a silly empty promise, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, he stayed still as Bucky's hand traced down his arm, fingers brushing the inside of his wrist before tugging him closer.

The bed dipped under their weight as Bucky leaned back against the headboard, Steve following, arms clinging to the taller boy's chest. Their bodies lined up awkwardly.

"Don't be mad at me," Bucky murmured. His thumb brushed along Steve's jaw, tilting his face so their eyes met. The corner of his lips twitched upward, forming the charming golden boy grin he knew always worked on basically everyone. "I don't mean nothin' by the girls. You know that."

Steve wanted to believe him. Desperately. He wanted to ask why it had to be anyone else at all, why Bucky couldn't just let this... whatever this was... be enough. But his throat closed around the words. He knew better than to voice them and ruin the nice moment they shared right now.

So instead, he let Bucky kiss him again.

This time, it was more intense, less careful. Their mouths parted, breaths hitching, every movement more heated up. Steve's hand slid into Bucky's hair. He brushed his fingertips through the messy strands and tugged, gentle but demanding. Bucky gave a low sound in response, half a laugh, half a groan, and it made Steve giggle softly.

The world shrank to just them. The sheets under their legs, the creak of the bedframe as they shifted, the faint hum of the radio. Steve's weight pressed against him, pinning him in place in the safest way possible.

Bucky broke away only to press quick kisses along Steve's cheek, the corner of his mouth, down the line of his jaw. Each little kiss lit Steve's eyes up more, his breath hitching every time Bucky's lips brushed skin.

"See?" Bucky whispered again, lips hovering by his ear. "Still you and me. Always you and me."

Steve let out a shaky laugh, though it cracked halfway. His hand slipped from Bucky's hair to his shoulder, clutching at him like he was afraid Bucky might vanish if he let go.

And then Bucky's hand slid lower. From Steve's jaw, down his chest, pausing at his stomach as though giving Steve the chance to stop him. He hesitated, just for a beat, before pressing his palm against the front of Steve's trousers. The touch wasn't rough. It was careful, slow. Bucky knew he shouldn't, and for just a moment, he considered pulling away.

Steve froze. His lips parted, his eyes snapping shut as heat spread in his belly. Bucky leaned in close, their noses brushing, his voice barely more than a murmur.

"Is it okay?"

Steve's throat bobbed as he swallowed. His answer was a whisper, but it came without hesitation. "Always."

For Bucky, maybe it was another reckless moment, another way to push boundaries and feel alive. For Steve, it was everything. The proof that even if the world would never understand, here in this room, Bucky still chose him.

So he gave in. Completely.

Bucky felt it. He felt the way Steve let go. The way Steve gave in so easily, letting go of what had been said only minutes ago. Forgiveness came too quickly with Steve, and something about that unsettled Bucky. He didn't deserve it, not really. Not after all the times he'd promised to change, promised he wouldn't hurt him again, only to circle back into the same mistakes.

But right now, Bucky couldn't choose to ignore it. It felt wrong. It was wrong. He couldn't just ignore the guilt, ignore the fact that he didn't deserve Steve and his forgiveness.

A harsh breath left his lungs as he ran a hand through his messy hair. "I, uh… I need to" He coughed as he pushed Steve off gently, freeing himself and sitting up. His knees wobbled when he stood, a sharp ache running through him that had nothing to do with his body and everything to do with the war in his head.

Steve blinked up at him, caught off guard, his brows furrowing. "What now?" His voice sounded almost wounded, and his hand drifted awkwardly down to cover the obvious swell in his trousers.

"Gotta lock the door," Bucky muttered, his voice raspy. He crossed the room, each step heavy, and turned the key in the lock. He tested it twice before leaning his forehead against the cool wood, breathing slowly, trying to ground himself. He wasn't sure what blocked him, what stopped him. "My mom…"

"Right." Steve nodded, feeling awkward as he found a loose thread hanging by the button of his slacks. He picked at it, trying to keep his free hand busy.

Then Bucky spun back around, restless hands fidgeting before he gave a sharp huff and rolled his shoulders like he was shrugging off something heavier than it looked. "Fuck it."

Steve's lips parted in confusion. God, he rarely could make sense of his best friend and the weird shit he always pulled. He was hard to read, even harder to understand properly, no matter how hard Steve tried. "Huh?"

"Fuck it," Bucky said again, firmer this time. He crossed the room, twisted the knob on the radio, and turned the volume up until jazz hummed loud enough to cover them. He always did that before it happened.

It.

The thing they didn't name, the thing nobody could know about. Especially not Bucky's mother or, actually, any of his family members, or god forbid, his nosy neighbours next door who ratted Bucky out for sneaking out many times before. Lifeless losers, Steve thought.

Steve watched him, suspicious and curious all at once.

“Can I suck your dick?”

Steve nearly choked on his own breath, coughing as heat shot to his face. His hand flew to his chest, knocking against it like he had to remind his lungs to do their job. His asthma never forgave moments like this.

“Jeez, man. Breathe,” Bucky said, laughter breaking loose, though it was softer than usual. He began undoing the buttons of his shirt, his movements casual, like it was nothing, but the sight of pale skin and faint muscle had Steve’s throat locking up all over again.

“I-uh,” Steve choked out, voice weak, cheeks pink.

Bucky’s grin curved. “So… can I?”

Steve’s answer came out as nothing more than a nod. Small, shaky. But it was enough.

“Atta boy,” Bucky murmured, dropping his shirt and letting it fall forgotten to the floor. He reached for the drawer beside his bed, tugging out a box of tissues and tossing it casually onto the sheets, like he’d done this before. Like he had it planned. To be fair, they had done this before…

Then his hands found Steve. At his waist first, bony beneath the fabric, before tugging him closer to the edge of the bed. Steve’s legs dangled awkwardly over the frame as Bucky worked the button of his slacks, his fingers unhurried.

The trousers loosened, sliding down his slim legs until they pooled on the wooden floor. Bucky didn’t say a word about the obvious erection between Steve’s legs. He didn’t tease. His hands simply lingered, warm and certain, slipping under the waistband of Steve’s boxers. He brushed against sensitive skin, slow, teasing the spot he knew made Steve twitch. Then, steady as ever, he began to ease them down, too.

The air between them thickened as Bucky knelt slightly, pushing the fabric past Steve’s hips until it joined the beige slacks on the floor. Steve sat there, vulnerable in a way that made his chest ache, but Bucky never judged. It was more like he was studying something precious he wasn’t sure he deserved to touch.

Bucky leaned in, pressing a quick kiss to his stomach, just below his ribs, his messy hair tickling Steve’s skin. The touch was brief, almost clumsy, but it made Steve smile, the tenseness loosening in his

shoulders.

Then Bucky's hand wrapped around him. His hand was so warm, firm, but careful at the same time. He knew exactly what he was doing.

Steve's whole body shook at the contact. He let out a sound he hadn't meant to, half-gasp, half-moan, his fingers clutching at the sheets again.

"Relax," Bucky murmured, his grin crooked as ever. There it was again. The Bucky Barnes confidence Steve would never have. His thumb brushed lightly, testing, and Steve's hips twitched in response. "See? Feels good, huh?"

Steve couldn't answer at first, too caught up in sensation, as if he had lost his ability to form words. When he finally found his voice, it was thin and shaky. "Y-yeah… Bucky-"

Hearing his name like that made something flicker across Bucky's face, something he quickly masked with another smirk. He leaned closer, his forehead pressing against Steve's tummy as his hand worked slowly. "Told you, Steve. I always come back to you."

Steve's hand shot up, grabbing onto Bucky's arm, not to stop him but to steady himself. His knuckles pressed into muscle, holding tight as if he let go, he might fall apart.

"Bucky-" His voice cracked on the name, pleading, overwhelmed.

"Shhh… Just breathe." Bucky whispered.

And then Bucky leaned in, pressing a kiss against Steve's penis. Hesitant at first, then firmer, more consuming. His hands slid to either side of Steve's narrow waist, holding him steady, grounding him in place.

A loud moan escaped Steve's lips as his body registered the touch. Panic flickered through him, and his hand shot up, covering his mouth before it could slip out again. Bucky's mother was just downstairs. If they were heard, if anyone found out, it would be game over.

Bucky couldn't help but chuckle. He shot Steve a quick, lopsided grin, mischief dancing in his blue eyes, before dipping down again. His mouth opened, lips closing carefully around the tip, testing, teasing.

And then he started sucking. Hard.

Bucky's lips wrapped tighter around him, slow and deliberate, his tongue flicking in a way that made Steve's body jolt against the headboard. The blond boy's knuckles whitened as he clutched at the sheets, the other hand still pressed hard over his mouth to muffle the sounds he couldn't hold back.

Steve's heartbeat pounded against his ribs. His eyes squeezed shut as he focused on keeping his breathing even.

Bucky, however, unbothered by his friend's trembling and quick breathing, started sucking harder and quicker.

"B-Bucky." His voice cracked on the name, muffled by his own palm. His legs trembled against Bucky's face between his thighs, his chest heaving.

Bucky glanced up just once, and the look there… so teasing and in a way almost daring, pushed Steve over the edge. Steve had always been on the quick side of cumming, and Bucky knew damn well.

Steve's body tensed, a shiver running through him. His breath hitched, the muffled moan escaping despite his hand pressed over his mouth.

Bucky didn't pull away until Steve's body sagged together, chest heaving, every muscle trembling with the effort of holding himself quiet.

For a moment, the room was filled only with the jazz song and the sharp sound of Steve's breathing. Bucky wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, flashing that crooked grin again, though it was softer this time, almost shy. He sat back on his heels, letting go of Steve's waist, who let his body slump back against the mattress. White, almost pale yellow watery cum slowly streamed out of his erect dick, starting to flow down his swollen shaft.

Steve finally dropped his hand from his lips, his face flushed, his hair damp against his forehead. Just as his chest was still heaving, the world spinning back into focus, a sharp knock rattled the bedroom door.

"James!" Bucky's mother's voice rang through, muffled but insistent. "Turn that radio down, you'll go deaf! And lunch is ready. Come, both of you."

Steve froze, panic shooting through him, but Bucky only huffed out a laugh as he turned to the door. He casually spat some cum into a

tissue, grinning like the situation was more funny than dangerous. Reaching over, he twisted the radio's dial lower until the jazz softened into the background hum again.

"We'll be right down, Ma!" he called, voice smooth, steady in a way Steve envied.

The doorknob rattled suddenly, making Steve flinch. "Why is this locked?" his mother demanded.

Bucky didn't miss a beat. "Because Becca always barges in without knocking," he replied, rolling his eyes, even though Rebecca wasn't even home. A poor excuse, but it was better than silence.

From the hallway came a huff of disapproval, then her fading footsteps down the stairs.

Steve lay flat on his back, one arm flung over his face, still trying to slow his breathing. His cheeks burned with both satisfaction and the sharp terror of nearly being caught.

Bucky laughed under his breath, shaking his head, but his eyes lingered on Steve like he couldn't quite look away. He reached for the box of tissues and gently got up to clean the other boy up before he would leave mysterious stains on his duvet.

Steve peeked at him from under his arm, lips tugging into a faint, tired smile. "You're so gonna get caught one day."

"Probably," Bucky muttered, crumpling up the tissue and tossing it toward the bin. "But you're worth that risk."

Chapter 3: Chapter 3

Friday, April 22nd, 1940 - 60 days left

Friday mornings in late April had a certain brightness to them. The sunlight warmed your cheeks, laundry lines up high between buildings, fluttering with shirts like banners, and the faint smell of warm asphalt rising off the street. Bucky Barnes pulled the back door open of the family's dark red sedan, jerking his chin for Steve to slide in first. Steve did, tucking himself into the corner of the leather bench seat, narrow shoulders hunched, school satchel pressed to his knees.

Bucky followed, dropping heavily beside him, and leaned his arm along the back of the seat, brushing Steve's shoulder in the process. Up front, Rebecca was already talking a mile a minute, her voice as annoying as ever so early in the morning.

"... and then Helen swore she saw Mr. Porter with his secretary outside the diner, but Helen always thinks she sees everything, you know how she is, Mama…"

Rebecca looked every bit the picture she wanted to be. Perfect dark curls, a navy dress with a crisp white collar, stockings without a single run, and a pair of small heels that clicked when she walked. Her lipstick was neat, her nails painted to match. Their mother nodded along as she drove, keeping one eye on the road and the other on her daughter.

Valeria's face softened when she glanced at Steve in the rearview mirror. "You look tired, Steve," she said, voice warm. "Did you have breakfast? You must eat more, yes?"

Steve flushed faintly, shifting in his seat. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you again for the ride."

"Always, darling."

Bucky smirked. His mother adored Steve. Always had. Something about his quiet politeness and his pale, fragile frame tugged at her in a way that Bucky couldn't quite compete with. Steve could've walked into their house unannounced, and she'd have handed him a plate before asking why he was there.

Rebecca snorted softly, catching Bucky's eye in the side mirror before

turning back to her gossip. He simply rolled his eyes and sank deeper into the seat.

By the time they pulled up in front of the high school, the front yard was already scattered with clusters of students, some tossing a ball around, others standing in little circles of chatter and smoke. Rebecca got out first, adjusting her skirt before hurrying toward a group of well-dressed girls waiting by the front steps. They greeted her with squeals, pulling her in.

Bucky paused only long enough to sling his satchel over his shoulder. “C’mon, punk,” he muttered to Steve, who thanked Valeria once more before climbing out.

They crossed the yard together, pushing through groups until they found their spot by the east side of the building, where the brick wall caught the morning sun and the crowd of boys always gathered before the bell.

“Barnes! Rogers!” Joey Russo waved them over, his crooked grin wide enough to show the teeth he always tried to hide. “Thought you were sleepin’ in.”

“Not with my ma drivin’,” Bucky said easily, clapping him on the shoulder.

Richie Doyle stood nearby Joey Russo with his hands stuffed in his pockets, ginger hair gleaming in the sunlight. He looked half hungover, but when wasn’t he? His easy grin impressed a few girls passing by to enter the school building, though he barely noticed. Charlie Kaplan was flipping a coin restlessly, his ever-present cigarette dangling between his lips, while Mickey Donnelly towered over them all, arms crossed.

Steve hung back a little, as he always did, but Bucky hooked his hand through the strap of Steve’s satchel and tugged him forward. ‘He’s with me’ was Bucky’s unspoken rule, and the others knew better than to question it.

The chatter turned, as it always did, to girls.

“Peggy Carter,” Richie was saying, shaking his head in mock disbelief. “The accent, the way she talks… so different, y’know? She’s somethin’ else.”

Charlie chuckled. “British girl in Brooklyn, bound to stand out. You

see her with Evie and Dot the other day? Like they've been friends since kindergarten."

"Evie, don't shut up about you, Barnes," Joey teased, nudging Bucky with his elbow. "Still braggin' 'bout how you two-"

Bucky groaned, scrubbing a hand through his messy hair. "Christ, Joey, keep your mouth shut."

"He ain't wrong though," Richie chimed in with a grin. "Evie's still thinkin' you'll take her to prom."

Steve's jaw tightened beside him, but Bucky seemed as unbothered as ever, flashing a careless grin. "Yeah, well, she'll be waitin' a long time. Evie's fun, but she ain't my type."

"Dot Miller is," Mickey teased, smirking. "We know you sittin' by her in church every Sunday. Bet she writes your name in her diary."

"Dot's sweet," Bucky admitted, dodging the tease, though he didn't add more. The truth was, Dot's easy smiles and gentle manners didn't tie him up in knots the way Steve's quiet glances did. He shoved that thought down, where it belonged.

The group laughed, tossing names and rumors around like cards in a deck. Girls came and went, circling the boys, some joining in, others just lingering. Evie Novak passed by with Peggy Carter and Dot Miller, her blonde hair shining as she cast a glance at Bucky. Smug, expectant. Peggy's sharp eyes flicked over the group with curiosity, while Dot offered a sweet, "Morning, boys," that set Richie grinning.

Steve stayed quiet through it all, sticking to Bucky's side, a shadow almost swallowed by the group's noise. But Bucky never let him slip back too far. Every so often, he nudged him, tossed him a joke, and made sure the circle didn't close without him.

Because Bucky always came back to Steve.

Right?

The school bell hadn't rung yet, so the halls were buzzing with chatter, footsteps, and the slam of lockers. Bucky slung an arm casually around his satchel strap as he walked, drawing half the attention of the corridor without even trying. Steve trudged alongside him, keeping to the wall whenever he could, shoulders instinctively folding inward.

“Locker time, Stevie,” Bucky announced, steering them toward the green metal row that had been around for probably countless years.

Steve twisted his key into the lock and tugged the narrow door open, revealing a cramped space stacked with loose papers, worn books, and a folded brown tote bag with his clothes for PE. The smell of old graphite and paper dust clung to everything.

“Algebra first thing Friday morning,” Bucky said with mock disgust, leaning against the neighboring locker with his arms crossed. “School wants us dead.”

“School wants me dead,” Steve corrected, pulling his algebra book out with a sigh. His pale fingers pressed against the spine like it might bite him. “You’ll be fine. You’re always fine.”

Bucky chuckled, tilting his head. His dark hair, already untidy again despite his attempt at styling it this morning, flopped a little over his forehead. His mother would’ve scolded him for looking messy if she were around right now. Good thing she wasn’t.

“I’ll make sure you don’t fail, punk. Stick with me.”

Steve snorted, closing his locker with a soft clang. “You say that every week.”

“‘Cause it’s true every week.”

They made their way toward the classroom, weaving through the thinning crowd of students. Steve clutched his book like a shield, while Bucky walked smoothly, hands in his pockets, greeting people as they passed.

When they stepped inside the math room, the air smelled faintly of chalk and mostly like sweaty teenagers. Not exactly the best combination.

At the front, Peggy Carter and Dot Miller were already seated, books stacked neatly, pens aligned, first-row model students. Peggy glanced up as the boys walked by. Her dark hair was pinned perfectly, her dress collar crisp. Dot sat beside her, all soft smiles and quiet good-girl behaviour.

“Ladies,” Bucky said with a grin, quick and careless, tossing them the kind of charm he always had on hand.

Peggy chuckled softly. Steve felt his stomach twist.

Bucky didn't notice. He kept moving, dropping into his usual spot toward the back row, motioning for Steve to sit beside him. Joey and Mickey had already claimed a desk two rows up, and Bucky leaned forward just long enough to steal a stick of bubblegum from Joey's desk before slouching comfortably in his chair.

Steve set his algebra book down with a soft thud. He pulled out a pencil and notebook, arranging them neatly, though his hand tapped restlessly on the cover.

"Don't glare holes in the back of my head, Rogers," Bucky murmured, unwrapping the gum and popping it in his mouth.

Steve stiffened. "I'm not glaring, and I'm not even behind you."

"Alright, stop," Bucky said around a lazy smirk, elbow nudging Steve's arm. "What's up with you this morning? You been quiet since the car."

Steve hesitated, chewing the inside of his cheek. His eyes stayed on his notebook, pencil hovering like he was about to start a problem. "You don't have to smile at every girl like you're- like you're…" He trailed off, unsure how much to reveal.

"Like I'm what?" Bucky pressed, amused.

"Like you're auditioning for 'most charming man in Brooklyn,'" Steve muttered at last. He didn't get mad often, but when he did, Bucky knew better than to push it. Or officially, he knew, but whether he acted on that knowledge was another story.

Truth was, Bucky could be a real pain in the ass. Nothing new there.

Bucky barked out a laugh, low enough that Joey half-turned in his seat to see what was so funny. "That's what this is about?" He leaned back in his chair, grin broadening. "Stevie, I flash a grin, that's all. It don't mean nothin'."

Steve frowned, pencil tapping sharply against his notebook. "You already said that more times than I can count."

Bucky turned his head, chewing slowly, studying him. For a moment, the noise of the classroom blurred out. It was just the two of them.

"You're really somethin', you know that?" Bucky said quietly. "I smile

at Carter and Miller, you get all twisted up. Meanwhile, you're sittin' right here, where you always are. Where I want you to be."

Steve's chest tightened. He wanted to believe it. He really did.

Before he could answer, the door at the front of the classroom opened, and their math teacher marched in with his usual frown, jacket already dusted with chalk. He carried a stack of papers under one arm, his round spectacles sliding down his nose.

"All right, everyone, settle down," Mr Klein barked. "Books out. Page seventy-four. Quadratic equations."

The rustle of pages filled the room. Steve flipped open his book with a sigh. Bucky nudged his foot under the desk, an affectionate tap against Steve's shoe.

Steve glanced at him, met his grin, and despite everything, despite the jealousy nagging at his mood, he felt the corner of his mouth tug upward.

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The spring air was warm by the time the lunch bell rang, sunlight collecting between the tall brick walls of the school. Out in the yard, the green metal lunch tables were already filling up. Everyone knew where they belonged, where their people sat, which bench was theirs. Cross the lines, and you risked stares, whispers, sometimes worse.

Bucky pushed through the double doors with Mickey and Joey, Steve following close behind, his satchel still slung across one shoulder. They crossed the yard toward the table that had long been theirs. A couple of the guys were already there. Richie claimed half the bench, nibbling on a soda bottle like it was the cure to his headache. Charlie, with his sleeves rolled up, was rolling dice on the tabletop for no apparent reason.

"'Bout time," Charlie called, mouth half full. "Thought you boys got lost."

"Had to drag Steve through algebra," Bucky shot back easily, sliding onto the bench. He patted the space beside him, and Steve sat down, tucking his hands under the table.

Bucky pulled his mother's neatly wrapped sandwich from his bag, tore it in half, and shoved one piece at Steve. "Eat. Mama'll kill me if she

finds out I let you starve."

Steve flushed faintly, muttering a soft "thanks" before taking a bite.

Conversation spilled around the table, as messy as the boys themselves. Joey was trying to tell a joke, but kept laughing halfway through. Mickey was already leaning forward, throwing in sharp comments. Richie and Charlie were arguing about money, putting on their best serious-business faces while looking exactly like what they were. Two irritated teens pretending they knew how the world worked.

"So, Richie," Bucky said, smirking across the table. "You sweet-talk Miriam yet? She's been having her eyes on you since Friday."

Richie laughed. "Miriam? Your ex? That girl don't want me, she wants somebody she can stir trouble with. She should go find Charlie instead."

"Hey," Charlie protested, sitting up straighter. "I stir fun. Not trouble."

"Same thing," Richie muttered, pressing his lips in a thin line to prove his point.

Steve found himself smiling quietly, chewing his sandwich while the others' voices rose and overlapped. He liked Joey the most. He was sharp, funny, and kind enough to make him feel included. The others? He tolerated them. But they all circled Bucky, and so Steve was forced to stay in their company as well.

It was Bucky who noticed the girls first, glancing up and flashing that grin of his.

Dot, Evie, and Peggy were heading across the yard, sunlight catching on their neat hair and pressed skirts. Evie led, chin tilted with that smug confidence of someone who knew half the boys at the table had noticed her. Dot trailed more softly, her blue eyes kind, while Peggy walked between them with an ease that marked her as different. She didn't look nervous the way new girls usually did. She walked like she'd been here all along.

Joey was the first to move, shoving at Richie until there was space. "Ladies," he said smoothly, flashing his smile. "Plenty of room at our table."

The three girls squeezed in, skirts brushing against the green metal

bench. Dot settled between Mickey and Joey, Evie slid next to Charlie, and Peggy… well, Peggy ended up next to Steve.

Steve shifted instinctively closer to Bucky, shoulder brushing against his. He made sure not to move too much, though, not to show her that he hated her joining them.

“Hello,” Peggy said warmly, her British accent clear. “Mind if I sit here?”

Steve coughed lightly. “Uh, no. No, it’s fine.”

It wasn’t fine. Not at all.

Bucky leaned forward, grinning at her. “Well, if it isn’t Peggy Carter herself. This here’s Steve Rogers. My best pal.” He clapped Steve on the back with a little too much force. “Don’t let him fool you, he’s sharper than he looks.”

Steve shot him a glare, cheeks flushing pink.

Peggy’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “Pleasure to meet you, Steve.” She reached into her lunch bag and pulled out a small tin, flipping it open to reveal neatly stacked cookies. “Brought a few extras. Would you like one?”

Steve blinked, caught off guard. “Uh, sure. Thank you.” He accepted the cookie carefully, as if it might break in his hands.

“You weren’t at the soda fountain on Wednesday, were you?” Peggy asked, tilting her head. “I kept hearing your name.”

Steve stiffened, glancing at Bucky, who was watching him with a faintly guilty smirk and reaching for a cookie. “No, I had things to do. Errands.”

Peggy nodded, unbothered. “Pity. Would’ve been nice to talk sooner.” She smiled again, soft but assured. “Next time, perhaps.”

Steve managed a quiet, “Maybe,” before biting into the cookie. It was good. Too good.

Around them, the conversations overlapped. Richie was already making Evie laugh, and Joey was stumbling through a story to Dot that had her covering her mouth politely.

But Bucky stayed half-turned toward Steve and Peggy, forcing the

three of them into a neat little circle. “So, Carter,” Bucky said, propping his elbow on the table and swallowing down the last bit of the cookie in his mouth, “what d’you think of Brooklyn so far? Bet it’s nothin’ like London.”

“Different, certainly,” Peggy replied, voice cool but friendly. “But people are much the same everywhere. Curious, nosy, some kind, some not. And the food is far too sweet.”

Bucky laughed. “You hear that, Rogers? She’s already got us figured out.”

Steve chewed slowly, trying not to let his discomfort show.

He nibbled at the edge of the cookie while Peggy Carter’s smile lingered. She seemed… nice, even if Steve’s instinct was to fold inward and disappear.

“You don’t say much, do you?” she asked softly with a chuckle.

Steve blinked, nearly choking on the bite of cookie. “I… uh… no, I mean, I do. Sometimes.”

Bucky snorted, elbow nudging his side. “Don’t let him fool you. He’s got opinions, all right. Just takes a little coaxing to drag ’em out.”

Peggy’s eyes flickered with amusement. “And you’re the coaxer, I suppose?”

“Somebody’s gotta be,” Bucky replied easily, chewing now on his sandwich with a grin.

Steve ducked his head, muttering something into his cookie. His ears were red, and Bucky caught it, grinning wider.

Across the table, Joey was leaning too close to Dot, laughing over his own joke. “-so then the guy says, ‘That’s not my dog, that’s my wife!’” He broke into laughter before Dot could even attempt to react. She gave him a patient smile, sipping her milk.

Richie, on the other hand, had Evie hanging on every word, leaning across the table with his trademark smirk. “Listen, Evie, you keep sayin’ soda shops are boring, but you just ain’t gone with the right company. Next time, you sit with me, I’ll prove it.”

Evie twirled a strand of blonde hair around her finger. “Oh, maybe.

But Bucky's still my favorite dance partner." She shot a pointed glance down the table, where Bucky was still half-focused on Peggy and Steve.

Bucky just smirked and raised his sandwich in mock salute. "You're a terrible liar, Novak."

Richie groaned, taking a swig from his flask-like soda bottle. "If I gotta hear one more word about who's dancin' with who, I'll lose it."

"Relax," Mickey said, clapping him on the back hard enough to make him cough. "Better talk than fights. Keep it that way."

Charlie leaned his elbows on the table, a new cigarette unlit between his fingers. "Only thing I wanna hear is who's in for a game after school. Got a new deck. Lucky, too."

"Lucky?" Richie scoffed. "You say that every time, man."

Steve was barely listening. Peggy had turned her attention back to him, leaning slightly closer.

"Do you draw?" she asked suddenly.

He blinked. "What?"

"Your hands," she said simply, nodding toward his pencil-stained fingers gripping his cookie, which he still hadn't finished. "You look like someone who sketches."

Steve hesitated. "…Sometimes."

Bucky jumped in, eager. "He's good. Real good. You should see the things he draws. Got this sketchbook he carries everywhere, right, Stevie?"

Steve's face heated, but Peggy's eyes only warmed. "You'll have to show me sometime," she said genuinely, before eating her own cookie.

Steve couldn't think of anything to say to that, so he just stared at the table, heart pounding too loud in his ears.

The noise around the table picked back up. Richie mocking, Joey laughing too loudly. The girls blended in easily, Dot with her soft laughter, Evie's bold comments, Peggy's quick wit.

It was Richie who finally leaned back, stretching his arms. “So what’s the plan for tomorrow, huh? Can’t all sit around this dump every day.”

“Park,” Joey said immediately, grinning. “Summer’s coming. Soda fountain after, maybe.”

Mickey nodded. “Park’s good. Toss a ball around, blow off some steam.”

All eyes turned to Bucky. He had that certain power in the group. If he said no, the plan was dead before it started.

Bucky chewed the last of his sandwich, shrugged like it was no big deal. “Park it is. Rogers, you’re comin’ too.”

Steve looked up, startled. “What? I… I’ve got-”

“You’ve got nothin’.” Bucky’s grin widened. “Don’t start with the excuses. You’re in.”

Chapter 4: Chapter 4

Saturday, April 23rd, 1940 - 59 days left

The bus rattled to a stop, brakes squealing, and Bucky was the first one down the steps, his prized portable radio slung under one arm like it weighed nothing. Steve followed more slowly, tightening the strap of his satchel over his shoulder.

The early May evening was warm, the sun sinking low but still painting the sky a pale gold. Shadows stretched long across the pavement, the air buzzing faintly with the hum of insects waking in the grass.

“C’mon, Stevie,” Bucky said, already marching down the sidewalk with that easy, loose-hipped walk of his. “Ain’t every day we get the whole gang together. You’ll like it.”

Steve stuffed his hands into his pockets, frowning at the ground as his shoes shuffled against the concrete. “I told you that I didn’t really want to come.”

“You say that about everything,” Bucky shot back, grinning as he adjusted the radio against his hip. “School dances, soda shops, even the movie last month. And then you get there, and whaddya know, you’re glad I dragged you.”

“That’s not true,” Steve muttered.

“It is true.” Bucky nudged his shoulder, his grin never fading. “You need this, punk. Gotta be with the guys, hang around, not just isolate yourself at home with your pencils and cough syrup.”

Steve’s jaw clenched. “It’s not cough syrup, it’s medicine.”

Bucky’s expression softened. “I know. I didn’t mean it like that.” He slowed just a little, the radio knocking against his thigh. “Look, I promise it’ll be fun. Just… trust me, all right?”

Steve glanced at him, at the messy dark hair, at the way he moved like the world belonged to him. And despite himself, Steve sighed. “Fine. But only because you asked.”

“That’s my guy,” Bucky said warmly, slinging an arm briefly around Steve’s shoulders.

By the time they cut to the corner of the park, the sound of laughter and voices carried to them on the breeze. The familiar group of their classmates was already spread across the grass, near the scattered flat stones that always served as seats. Someone had dragged an old bucket out. It was filled with ice that was now halfway melted, bottles of cheap booze, and even cheaper bottles of beer.

“Guys!” Richie's voice carried, slurred already even though the sun hadn’t fully dipped. He raised his bottle of beer in greeting, his red hair catching the light. “About damn time!”

Bucky’s grin widened. “Richie, you swigger. You start without us?”

“Wouldn’t be me if I didn’t,” Richie laughed, earning a groan from Mickey, who was tossing a football back and forth with Charlie.

Then Richie was already leaning back on his elbows, surrounded by a couple of girls who weren’t brave enough to drink but were laughing at his every word. Some friends of Evie, maybe. Steve didn’t really bother with trying to remember who exactly they were. Joey waved the two boys over, sliding to make space on one of the stones.

Bucky lit up, his whole posture shifting to something bigger, louder, and more alive. He clapped Richie on the shoulder, ruffled Joey’s hair, and called a greeting to Mickey. Bucky was blooming, like he always did when it was his time to shine.

Steve trailed behind, quieter, clutching the strap of his satchel tighter. He eyed the bucket of bottles, the smell of booze already mixing with the smoke of lit cigarettes. His stomach turned.

“C’mon, Rogers,” Richie called, half-joking, “grab a drink! Loosen up!”

“I don’t-” Steve started, but Bucky was already reaching into the bucket, plucking out a bottle with one hand and a cigarette offered to him with the other.

“Cheers, boys,” Bucky said, knocking back a quick shot before lighting up, smoke curling lazily into the evening air.

Steve just sank down onto one of the flat stones, folding himself small. The cool rock pressed into his palms as he set them at his sides. He didn’t drink. Couldn’t, not with his medication. He didn’t smoke either. Asthma. He watched instead, his pale face unreadable, as Bucky leaned forward into the circle, laughing, sharp and golden in the fading light.

And for the first time that night, Steve wondered if he was only here because Bucky wanted him to be or if he had a place of his own at all.

The past half hour had crawled by in uneven minutes. Steve sat on a flat stone at the edge of the circle, his knees drawn up a little, sketchbook balanced on one thigh. His pencil scratched faintly against the page while laughter rolled around him, louder as the bottles emptied and cigarettes burned down to their filters.

Bucky was in his element, head tilted back, smoke curling from his lips, eyes shining when Evie Novak leaned into his side with her high-pitched laugh. She was shameless about it, twirling her golden hair around her finger as she whispered something that made him grin wider. Steve's jaw tightened. He bent lower over his sketchbook, shading the curve of a shoulder, the line of a grin.

Joey and Mickey hovered by the bucket, teasing Richie about watering down his shots. Charlie bragged about the money he'd won in a card game over the weekend. Everyone seemed looser, freer, like the world wasn't burning across the ocean.

Steve wasn't part of it. Every now and then, Bucky remembered him, shot him a smile, called his name across the circle, asked if he wanted a sip or a drag. Steve waved him off each time, stomach twisting. He didn't want it. Couldn't.

So he sketched. The scene unfolded beneath his pencil in quick, sure lines. The tilt of Joey's crooked grin, the way Richie gestured too big with his bottle, the sharp cut of Bucky's jawline with Evie pressed close beside him. He drew to fill the silence that pressed in around him, to drown out the ache of being here but not really in it.

He was halfway through shading the crumpled bucket of ice when the air shifted. Excitement rippled through the group. Dot Miller and Peggy Carter had arrived, late but not unwelcome.

"'Bout time, ladies!" Richie yelled, already lifting his bottle in greeting again.

Dot offered a wave, her navy skirt swishing as she slipped into the circle. Peggy was different. Her presence pulled in attention without her asking for it. She wore a crisp white blouse tucked neatly into a dark green skirt that brushed her calves, a light cardigan slung over her shoulders. Her dark hair was pinned in soft curls that framed her soft cheekbones, and her red lipstick hadn't smudged a bit.

Steve kept his head down, pretending to be absorbed in his sketch, but when Peggy's eyes swept the group, they got caught on him. And instead of drifting toward the louder cluster, toward Bucky, or the other boys, she walked straight to the stone where he sat.

"May I?" she asked in that soft British accent, gesturing to the empty space beside him.

Steve blinked up, startled. "Uh, sure." He shifted awkwardly, moving his knees and his sketchbook to give her room.

Peggy sat silently, folding her hands over her knees before nodding toward the notebook. "You're drawing at a party like this?"

His throat felt dry. He flipped the page toward her, revealing the half-finished scene. "Sometimes."

Her eyes lit. "That's more than 'sometimes.' That's talent." She leaned closer, studying the lines with genuine awe. "You've caught them all as they are… Look at Joey's smile, and Bucky's shoulders. Oh, that's remarkable."

Heat crept up Steve's neck. "It's just… practice."

"Practice doesn't explain this," Peggy said warmly, tapping the corner of the page with one neat finger. "You've got an eye. You see people and the little details about them."

Steve hesitated, then flipped back a few pages, showing her rough sketches of rooftops, of his mother knitting in her chair, of Bucky slouched on his bed with a comic. She didn't laugh. She didn't call them silly. She looked at them like they mattered.

"You don't drink?" she asked after a moment, nodding at the bottles nearby in the bucket.

Steve shook his head quickly. "Can't. Medication."

Peggy's expression softened. "I don't drink either."

He blinked at her, surprised. "Really?"

"Mm." She smiled faintly. "Never cared for the taste. And this-" she gestured at the circle of half-drunk laughter "isn't really my scene, if I'm honest. I don't much like smoke in my hair or boys yelling in my ear."

Steve couldn't help it. He laughed quietly, glancing at her sideways. "You'd think otherwise."

Peggy tilted her head. "Because I'm here?"

"Well… yeah." He shrugged. "Most people who hate this stuff don't show up to it."

She gave him a little smile. "Sometimes you go where the people are, even if the party isn't to your taste. Otherwise, you get left out of the fun. Dot taught me this."

He stared at her a moment, feeling seen in a way that startled him. "Yeah," he murmured. "I know what you mean."

Their conversation shifted, easy and surprising.

Peggy tilted her head, studying him with that look of hers. "So, what do you want to do after school, Steve?"

He blinked, caught off guard. "What do I want to do?" He gave a short laugh, rubbing the back of his neck. "That's a dangerous question."

"I asked it on purpose." Her lips quirked. "Humor me."

Steve hesitated, chewing the inside of his cheek. He'd never been good at putting it into words, not when it mattered. "I want to go to art school."

Her brows lifted, pleasantly surprised. "Art school?"

"Yeah." He nodded, eyes darting down to his hands. "But it doesn't really have a future. Not like medicine, or engineering, or the army." His mouth twisted. "Not like what everyone else is doing."

Peggy leaned back in her chair, arms folded, but her gaze never wavered. "Why does it have to have a future? Why can't it just be about what makes you feel happy?"

"Because," Steve muttered, almost defensively, "My ma works herself near to the bone every day. Double shifts at the hospital, sleeping behind a curtain in what used to be a storage closet. I don't wanna let her down. I don't wanna…" His voice faltered, heavy with guilt. "It just feels selfish."

Peggy's eyes softened. "It isn't selfish to want a life that's yours, Steve." She smoothed her skirt thoughtfully. "I want to work for the

army. Not just in the office, either. I want to be something in it. Be the first woman to achieve something that matters."

His brows rose. "The army? You?"

"Why not me?" Her chin lifted confidently. "I may not look it, but I can hold my own. And the world won't change if no one tries."

Steve looked at her, really looked. At the fire in her voice, the certainty in her posture. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard someone talk about the future with that much determination.

Before he could answer, a familiar hand clamped around his arm.

"C'mon, punk," Bucky's voice cut in, warm and commanding all at once. "Quit hiding."

Steve barely had time to snap his sketchbook shut before Bucky tugged him to his feet. His dark hair was messier now, his grin loose from the booze, smoke clinging to his shirt. He didn't even glance at Peggy, just dragged Steve back toward the circle where the others were cheering for another round.

Peggy gave Steve a small, knowing smile as he was pulled away. Bucky didn't let go of his arm until they were surrounded by the noise and laughter of the circle. He declined a cigarette from Mickey's hand before turning sharp-eyed to Steve.

"What was that with Carter?" His tone was casual on the surface, but there was an edge underneath.

Steve blinked. "What?"

"You and Peggy." Bucky jerked his chin back toward the stone Steve had been sitting on. Peggy had moved by now and joined the other circle further away from theirs. "Looked cozy. You were sketching for her, huh?" His grin was crooked, but it didn't reach his eyes. "Didn't know you were trying to impress her."

Steve stared, caught off guard. "We were just talking."

Bucky took a swig from the bottle in his hand, watching him over the rim. "Yeah. Talking. You never 'just talk' with me like that."

The words hit harder than they should have, and something in Steve's chest tightened. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

“I dunno, punk. You looked real comfortable with her, that’s all. Got you all flustered.”

Steve’s face flushed hot, but not with embarrassment. “So what if I was?”

Bucky raised an eyebrow, leaning back on his heels like he’d won something. “Nothin’. Just funny, you givin’ me a scolding about girls one day, and then sittin’ with one like she’s your best gal the next.”

That did it. Steve’s jaw clenched, his fist tightening around his sketchbook. He threw a glance at the rest of the group. They were too wrapped up in their drinking and shouting to notice. He turned back to Bucky, his voice low but sharp.

“Can we talk? Alone.”

Bucky shrugged, smirking as though Steve had just challenged him to arm wrestle. “Sure. Whatever you want, Stevie.”

They slipped away from the circle, past the edge of the grass where the lamplight began to scatter into the shadows. Steve stopped near a bare patch of dirt, the noise of their friends fading into the background.

He turned to Bucky. “You’re drunk.”

“I’m not drunk,” Bucky replied, lowering his bottle as if it would help prove his point. “I’ve had a couple. Big deal.”

“It is a big deal when you start acting like this.” Steve’s voice was louder now. “Accusing me over a five-minute conversation when you-” He broke off, teeth grinding. “You don’t get to do that.”

Bucky blinked, thrown. “Do what?”

“Play jealous.” The words came out of Steve before he could stop them. “You don’t get to act like you own me when you’ve been with Evie twice, and Miriam keeps looking at you like she’s waiting for your return to her at school, and you let her. And every other girl you flash that grin at. And I sit there and take it, Buck. I take it because… because I’m stupid enough to think maybe it doesn’t mean anything, maybe it’s just you being you.”

Bucky’s smirk faded, but he covered it quickly with a scoff. “Aw, come on, Stevie. You’re makin’ it sound worse than it is.”

“Worse than it is?” Steve’s voice shot up, sharp and raw. “Sunday. You remember Sunday? On your damn bed, you told me…” His chest heaved, and he tapped a finger at Bucky’s chest. “You told me we were everything. Always. And then two days later you’re back to this.” He waved wildly toward the laughter behind them. “Like none of it mattered.”

Bucky flinched, just barely, but he shook his head and exhaled sharply. “It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple.” Steve’s throat burned. “Either you mean it, or you don’t. And you don’t get to call me out for talking to a girl when you’ve been- When you’ve been-” His voice cracked. “Cheating on me without even callin’ it that.”

Bucky dragged a hand through his hair, messy strands falling into his eyes. “I ain’t cheatin’ if we’re not... If we never said-”

Steve’s whole body went rigid. “Don’t you dare.”

“Stevie, listen-”

“No!” Steve’s eyes teared up, his breath sharp in the cooling night air. “I’ve been listening. I listen every damn time you sweet-talk me and then turn around and laugh with the next girl in line. I listen when you tell me I matter, that we matter, and then you make me feel like I’m some dirty secret you can’t admit to.” His voice dropped, bitter. “You’re scared, Bucky. Scared to admit what you want. So you take it from me in the dark and then run back to what’s easy when the sun’s out.”

Bucky opened his mouth, then shut it. His shoulders stiffened, his jaw locking. “You don’t understand-”

“No, I do.” Steve’s fists shook at his sides. “I understand perfectly. You’re selfish. You get everything. You get the girls, the friends, the laughs. And when you’re lonely, you come to me, because you know I’ll never say no.”

The words hung between them.

For once, Bucky had no quick retort. He shifted his weight, staring at the dirt like it might give him the answer. His hand twitched like he wanted to reach for Steve, but he didn’t.

Steve’s voice broke the silence, low and final. “I didn’t even want to

be here tonight." He shoved his sketchbook into his satchel, snapping the clasp hard. "And you know what? I shouldn't have come."

Bucky finally looked up, his expression unreadable. "Come on, man. Don't be like this."

Steve's heart ached at the familiar phrase. But it wasn't enough. Not anymore.

He turned, shoulders stiff, and walked back toward the bus stop, the shouts and laughter of their classmates fading behind him.

And for the first time since they were kids, he didn't look back to see if Bucky followed.

—

The apartment was dim when Steve reached the door, the hallway outside humming faintly with the sound of neighbors' TVs. He fished out his key with trembling fingers, forcing the lock open as quietly as possible.

The air inside smelled faintly of tea and lavender soap. The television flickered in the corner of the living room, muted voices carrying news about the war in Europe. His mother was curled on the couch, blanket wrapped snug around her legs, her blonde hair loose and wavy from a long day. Her glasses sat crooked on her nose, and her knitting lay abandoned in her lap.

Steve shut the door softly, hoping maybe she'd drifted off, that he could slip into his room unseen. His satchel slid from his shoulder with a dull thud beside his bedroom door in the narrow hallway.

"Steve?" Her voice was tired but clear, cutting through the silence

He froze, hand still on the doorknob to his room. "Yeah, Ma. It's me."

"You're home late." She sat up a little, tugging the blanket tighter. Her eyes, even rimmed with fatigue, sharpened when she saw him step into the light. His face was blotchy, his eyes red-rimmed. He tried to duck his head, but she wasn't fooled. "Honey…"

Steve opened his mouth, then closed it. His throat burned.

Sarah patted the couch beside her, her smile soft, voice steady. "Come sit with me."

He hesitated, then shuffled over, sinking into the old cushions. She pulled the blanket around him too, tucking him in close the way she had when he was little. The warmth and the faint scent of her soap wrapped around him, and before he could stop himself, he leaned into her side.

She stroked his back in slow circles, kissing the crown of his head. “What happened, sweetheart?”

“I just… I don’t know what’s wrong with me.”

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Sarah said immediately, firm but gentle.

Steve shook his head, trying to find words without spilling the whole truth. He couldn’t tell her about how close he and Bucky really were. Not in 1940, not when she’d worry herself sick over what people would say, what it could mean for him. But he could tell her parts of it.

“It’s Bucky,” he admitted, his voice low. “We- he just… he doesn’t treat me like I matter sometimes. Not really. One minute it’s like I’m the most important person in the world, and the next he’s laughing with someone else like I’m invisible.” His chest tightened, and the words tumbled out faster. “And I sit there, and I take it, and I tell myself it’s fine, but it’s not. And I don’t- I don’t know why I let him do that to me.”

Sarah’s arm tightened around him, her thumb stroking gently over his shoulder. “Because you love him,” she said softly.

Steve froze, pulling back just enough to look up at her, startled.

She gave him that tired, knowing smile only a mother could manage. “I’ve seen the way you look at him, Steve. Since you were knee-high. It’s plain as day.” She pressed a hand against his cheek, brushing away the tear tracks with her thumb. “There’s nothing wrong with loving someone. Not ever. The hard part is figuring out if they love you the way you need them to.”

Steve’s throat closed. “What if he doesn’t?”

“Then you’ll hurt for a while,” Sarah said simply. “That’s the risk of caring. But you’ll still have me. You’ll still have your art, your future. You’ll still have yourself. No one can take that away from you.”

Steve sniffed, curling tighter into her side. “It just feels like he can.”

“Oh, honey.” Sarah kissed the top of his head again, her voice catching just faintly. “I know. I know it feels that way now. But you’re stronger than you think. You always have been.”

They sat like that for a long time, the hum of the TV filling the silence, her hand tracing soothing patterns over his back. Eventually, Steve’s breathing evened out, his body sagging against hers with exhaustion.

Sarah smiled softly, brushing his hair back from his damp forehead. “You’ve got such a good heart, Steve. Don’t let anyone make you think it’s too much.”

Chapter 5: Chapter 5

Monday, April 24th, 1940 - 58 days left

Bucky leaned against the side of his mother's dark red sedan, one foot tapping impatiently on the driveway. Today's spring morning was cool, sunlight slanting across the neat row of houses. Becca was already in the passenger seat, hair pinned perfectly, lips painted a soft pink. She was yapping about something, as always, some gossip she'd heard at school, but Bucky wasn't listening.

He was scanning the sidewalk.

Any minute now, Steve should've come walking down the block, suspenders crooked, satchel bouncing against his thin frame. Usually, he wore that tired-but-determined little smile when he slid into the back seat, nodding politely to Bucky's mother before muttering something to Bucky about homework or comics or whatever else came to mind.

But this morning, the sidewalk stayed empty.

Bucky shifted, pushing a hand through his messy hair. Maybe Steve was running late. Maybe he'd overslept. He tried to shrug it off, but the longer he stood there, the more restless he grew.

"James," his mother's voice cut through the air, firm but not unkind. She was already behind the wheel, her blue eyes fixed on him through the open window. "Get in, we're going to be late."

He hesitated, glancing down the block one last time. Still no Steve. Not getting a call all day yesterday should have predicted this. Sundays and Saturdays were their days. He had simply assumed that Steve had been too busy to call and ask to hang out. Or, well, he was mad.

He was still mad, wasn't he?

"Now, James."

He sighed, shoulders slumping, and slid into the back seat. The leather was cool against his palms. As the car pulled away, his chest tightened, an invisible weight pressing down on him. He tried to drown out the ache with Becca's chatter and his mother's soft

humming, but his thoughts kept circling back to last night.

The fight. The look on Steve's face when he turned to walk away.

You're selfish. You come to me in the dark and then run back to what's easy when the sun's out.

Bucky rubbed a hand over his face. He hadn't wanted to hurt Steve. Not like that. He just hadn't known what to say, how to deal with the sharp edge of jealousy that had cut him the second he saw Peggy leaning close. He hated himself for it now. Steve wasn't like the other girls. He wasn't like anyone. And Bucky had pushed him too far.

By the time the car rolled up in front of the high school, Bucky's stomach was knotted. He thanked his mother distractedly, shouldered his satchel, and headed toward the steps with Becca trailing behind. She split off almost immediately, her heels clicking as she joined a cluster of girls.

The boys were already in their usual spot. Joey was telling some ridiculous story, Mickey was laughing, and Richie was tossing an apple up and down in one hand.

"Hey, Barnes," Richie called, waving his flask as if it were a trophy. "Where's your shadow? He's usually glued to your hip."

Bucky forced a grin he didn't feel. "Ain't seen him yet. You?"

They all shook their heads. No one knew.

Bucky shoved his hands into his pockets, listening to the bell ring loud and shrill. He followed the others toward the building, but his mind wasn't on their jokes or chatter. It was on Steve.

—

Geography was their first class. The globe sat on its shelf near the back, piles of ancient-looking books surrounding it.

And there was Steve, already in his seat by their usual table.

He looked… as always, but something about his facial expression was off. His suspenders hung crooked over his brown trousers, his white shirt wrinkled as he never bothered with the iron. Dark circles rimmed his pale eyes, his blonde hair falling messily onto his forehead. He didn't look up when Bucky approached. His pencil scratched steadily

across the page, sketching the round curve of the classroom globe in exact detail.

Relief crashed over Bucky so strongly that it made his knees weak. He dropped into the chair beside him, leaning close.

“God, Stevie. I’m glad to see you.” His voice was relieved. “Where were you this morning? You weren’t at my house.”

No answer. Just the steady scrape of pencil on paper.

Bucky swallowed, forcing a shaky grin. “I kept lookin’ for you. Thought maybe you overslept.”

Nothing.

“C’mon, punk. Say something.”

Finally, Steve glanced up. Just a brief little look. His eyes were flat, tired, and then he looked back down at his sketch without a word.

Bucky’s chest twisted. He reached out, gently but firmly catching Steve’s jaw in one hand and tilting his face toward him. The boy’s skin was cool beneath his fingertips, his lashes fluttering as he tried to look away.

“Stevie,” Bucky said softly, the grin gone now. His voice cracked, earnest. “I’m sorry. I messed up last night. I was drunk and stupid and- I didn’t mean half the garbage I said.”

Steve’s lips parted slightly, but still he said nothing.

Bucky leaned closer, his words tumbling out in a rush. “You matter to me. You gotta know that. You’re not just- just some option I go to when I’m bored. You’re… Hell, you’re my best guy. Always have been. I just… I don’t always know how to handle it. And I hurt you. I hate myself for it.”

Steve’s eyes flickered, wet at the edges, but he stayed quiet. His pencil slipped from his hand and rolled across the desk, forgotten.

“Please,” Bucky whispered, thumb brushing the edge of the other boy’s cheekbone. “Don’t shut me out. I’ll do better. I swear.”

Steve blinked, his throat bobbing, but before he could force out a reply, the sharp sound of heels clicked against the floor.

“All right, boys and girls,” Miss Davenport’s clipped voice rang out as she entered, setting her stack of books on the desk with a thud. “Let’s turn our attention to maps of Europe. The situation across the ocean is not one we can afford to ignore.”

Bucky jerked his hand back, straightening in his seat as the rest of the class quietened down. Steve pulled his notebook close again, shoulders tense.

—

The bell rang, sharp and final. The scrape of chairs filled the room as students stuffed books into bags and hurried toward the door in noisy groups. Miss Davenport was still writing on the chalkboard, the white dust squeaking under her hand.

Bucky hadn’t paid attention for a single second of the entire lesson.

He’d spent the last ninety minutes stealing glances at Steve, watching him sketch quietly in the margins of his notebook instead of taking notes, his jaw set, his small shoulders stiff. Every time Bucky opened his mouth, he’d closed it again, afraid of pushing too hard with the teacher only feet away. But now. Now he couldn’t waste another second.

He shoved his books into his satchel in one messy motion, nearly spilling them, and leaned across the desk toward Steve.

“Stevie, hey. Listen,” he rushed out, his voice pitched low so the others wouldn’t hear. “We gotta talk. You didn’t answer me before. I need you to-”

Steve was slow, slipping his pencil into his case and stacking his books neatly. He didn’t look at Bucky when he spoke.

“Just leave me alone, Buck.”

Bucky froze, like someone had stabbed a knife through his ribs. “What? No. I- I can’t do that.”

Steve stood, adjusting the strap of his satchel across his narrow frame, finally meeting his eyes. “You can. And you should.”

The words hurt more than Bucky had been ready for. Before Steve could walk out, Bucky pushed up from his chair, following him down the row of desks and into the hallway. The corridor was buzzing with

students, lockers slamming, voices echoing, but Bucky's focus was only on the figure in front of him.

"Stevie," he called, trying not to sound desperate but failing miserably. "Wait. Please."

Steve kept walking, dodging a few running teens, ignoring Bucky's call.

Something inside Bucky snapped. He reached forward and caught Steve's arm. "Enough," he muttered, dragging him away from the crowd before the blond could wriggle free. He yanked open the door to the nearest room, a darkened biology lab, the blinds drawn, the smell of chemicals faint in the air, and tugged Steve inside.

The door shut behind them with a click.

Steve tried pulling back, eyes widening, his chest rising and falling fast. "What the hell, Bucky? You can't just-"

"I can't lose you," Bucky blurted, the words tumbling out before he could stop them. His grip loosened, but he didn't step back. "Not over some stupid mistake. Not after everything."

Steve blinked at him, stunned by the rawness in his voice.

"I'm sorry," Bucky said, again and again, as if repeating it would make it true enough for Steve to believe. "I was drunk, and I was jealous, and I didn't think. I never think when it comes to you. You're right, I'm a jerk. But I swear to God, Stevie, I didn't mean it."

Steve swallowed, his throat tight. He'd wanted to hear the apology, but hearing it like this, so frantic, broken… It made it harder to hold onto his anger. Still, he forced the words out.

"You can't keep doin' this, Buck. You can't tell me one night I'm everything, then turn around and make me feel like I'm nothing the next. It- it breaks me." His voice cracked on the last word.

Bucky's chest tightened. He stepped closer, almost pleading. "Then tell me what I gotta do. Anything. Just say it, and I'll do it."

Steve shook his head, looking down at his shoes, the scuffed leather worn thin at the toes. "I don't need promises you won't keep."

"Then I'll keep them," Bucky insisted, pressing forward until Steve's

back brushed the wooden door. His eyes burned, but he didn't care if Steve saw. "I'll keep every damn one. Just don't shut me out. Please."

Silence stretched between them. Finally, Steve's gaze lifted, meeting Bucky's. His blue eyes were tired, wounded, but there was something else, too. Something softer.

"God help me, Buck," Steve whispered. "I want to believe you."

That was all it took.

Bucky leaned forward, pressing his lips to Steve's in a kiss that was rough, almost desperate. Steve stiffened at first, his fists clenched against Bucky's chest, but then he melted, his hands curling into the fabric of Bucky's shirt, dragging him closer.

Bucky groaned into the kiss, his forehead pressing hard against Steve's as he broke for air, only to find his mouth again. "I'm sorry," he whispered against his lips, again and again, the words almost a prayer. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Steve gasped when Bucky's hands cupped his jaw, tilting his head back, trapping him against the door. His heart pounded, the rage from before shifting to something rawer, needier.

The kisses deepened, less and less careful, mouths moving hungrily, teeth meeting soft lips. Bucky's fingers slid down, tracing the line of Steve's neck, his chest, until they found his waist. He pulled him tighter, their bodies rubbing against each other, and one hand slipped lower still, pressing firmly over the front of Steve's trousers.

Steve twitched, a sharp breath coming from his throat. Heat rushed to his face, and for a moment, he almost let himself give in fully. Give in to the apology, the closeness, the way Bucky always made him feel both wanted and ruined at once.

But reality hit hard, though. The lab. The unlocked door. The risk.

"Bucky," Steve broke the kiss, panting, pressing a hand hard against his chest. "We can't. Not here."

Bucky froze, his hand still at Steve's crotch, lips swollen, eyes wide with desire. He pressed his forehead against Steve's, breathing hard, the apology still trembling on his lips.

"I just- I needed you to know," he whispered. "Needed you to feel it."

Steve's hand stayed over his chest, keeping that little space between them, even as his eyes closed and he leaned his head back against the door, fighting the ache in his chest.

—

The stub of Steve's pencil scratched against the page, the numbers smudging faintly as his hand cramped from holding it too tightly. Algebra never came easy to him, no matter how many times Bucky tried explaining the equations like they were puzzle pieces just waiting to be fit together.

Steve squinted down at the problem, tapping the eraser against the edge of his desk, when the sound of his mother's voice called through the tiny apartment.

"Steven? Telephone for you!"

His head jerked up, startled. Hardly anyone ever called him, except one person. He already knew.

He pushed back his chair and stretched out his stiff shoulders. His bedroom was small enough that crossing it took only a few steps. He padded down the short hallway, the scent of onions and garlic drifting from the kitchen. His mother stood at the stove, hair tied back in a braid, the radio buzzing faintly with some big band tune.

The pale yellow phone clung to the wall just beside the archway to the kitchen, its spiral cord dangling like a tail. Steve picked up the receiver, pressing it to his ear.

Before he could even say hello, a familiar voice sighed dramatically down the line.

"You're still mad at me."

Steve leaned back against the wall, eyes rolling instinctively even though Bucky couldn't see it. "You don't even know if I'm still mad yet."

Bucky gave a short, almost sheepish laugh. "I don't gotta. I can hear it in your voice. Short answers, all clipped. You've been mad at me long enough to have a tell."

Steve's lips twitched despite himself. "Maybe you gotta think about why that is."

“Oh, believe me,” Bucky said quickly. “I been thinking about nothing else all day. Drove Becca crazy with all my fidgeting at the dinner table. Nearly got my ear chewed off.”

Steve smirked at the thought, picturing Rebecca rolling her eyes while her brother fidgeted like a maniac in his chair. He still didn’t give in, though. “And what conclusion did you come to, genius?”

“That I’m an idiot.” Bucky’s voice was dead serious, no hesitation. “Biggest one in Brooklyn. And that I don’t wanna screw this up with you anymore.”

Steve exhaled softly, his grip tightening on the receiver. He didn’t answer right away.

He heard his mother humming under her breath, the soft clink of a wooden spoon tapping against a pan. The clock above the archway ticked steadily.

Bucky filled the silence himself, words tumbling out. “So, here’s what I’m thinkin’. You give me a list, Stevie. Stuff I ain’t supposed to do anymore. Things that piss you off, things that hurt you. Doesn’t matter what it is. I’ll write it down, I’ll memorize it. Like commandments, you know? You shall not flirt with every girl that looks at you. You shall not get drunk and say dumb things. You shall not make Steve Rogers feel like he’s second best.”

Steve huffed out a laugh despite his best efforts, lowering his voice so his mother wouldn’t hear. “Bucky, you sound ridiculous.”

“Ridiculous but honest,” Bucky shot back, a grin obvious in his voice. “Come on. You gotta admit, it’s a good plan. Just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it. Whatever it takes.”

Steve pressed the phone cord between his fingers, twisting it absently. “It doesn’t work like that, Buck.”

“Then tell me how it works. Teach me,” Bucky urged, the words softening. “I don’t wanna keep messin’ up. Not with you.”

Steve’s heart squeezed, caught between desperation and affection. He wanted to be mad still. He wanted to cling to the anger that had carried him through yesterday. But hearing Bucky talk like this, trying so hard in his own clumsy way… it cracked something inside him.

“Maybe I’ll think about makin’ you a list,” Steve said finally, fighting

down the smile tugging at his mouth.

“That’s progress!” Bucky’s voice brightened instantly. “I’ll take it. Might even frame it, hang it on my wall.”

Steve snorted. “You’re hopeless.”

“Hopeless for you,” Bucky said, half-teasing, half too real.

The words made Steve’s face heat up. He bit back a smile and kept his eyes on the kitchen clock. The ten-minute mark where the phone bill jumped was creeping closer and closer.

Bucky must’ve noticed his silence. “How much time we got left?”

Steve glanced up. “Plenty.”

“Damn.” A pause. Then a giggle. “Wish I had more.”

Steve did too, though he wouldn’t say it. “You’ll live,” he murmured instead.

Bucky laughed low, like he knew. “So tomorrow, after school, you’ll come over? We can for real read that alien comic from last time. Radio, too. Promise I’ll even let you pick the station.”

Steve hesitated. Part of him wanted to refuse, to protect himself from getting hurt again. But the thought of sitting alone at home tomorrow instead of hearing Bucky’s laugh, the way he always lit up a room, he couldn’t bring himself to say no.

“Alright,” he said softly.

“Alright,” Bucky echoed, relief plain in his voice. “Thanks, Stevie. Really. I’ll make it up to you.”

The clock ticked over. Steve sighed. “Listen, I would love to talk more, but I was working on algebra, Buck. Gotta go.”

“Already? Aw, come on. Just thirty more seconds?”

Steve smiled faintly, even as he pulled the receiver away. “Goodnight, Buck.”

And then the line went dead.

He hung the phone back in its place and turned toward the kitchen.

His mother still stood at the stove, stirring a pot, her face glowing in the light. She hadn't said a word, but the twinkle in her eye gave her away.

"What was all that about?" she asked with a small grin.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck, avoiding her gaze. "Nothin'. Just Buck bein' Buck."

Sarah chuckled softly, shaking her head. "That boy talks your ear off more than anyone I've ever met."

Steve just smiled, stepping closer and inhaling the scent of dinner. "Smells amazing, Ma," he said quickly, dodging more questions she would surely ask if he gave her the chance to.

"Mmhm," she answered knowingly, turning back to the stove.

Chapter 6: Chapter 6

Tuesday, April 25th, 1940 - 57 days left

The radio crackled faintly from the dresser, a soft jazz tune drifting across Bucky's room. Afternoon sunlight poured through the half-open blinds, striping the blue-painted walls with warm gold. The king-sized bed creaked when Bucky shifted, cross-legged on top of the blanket with an old science book balanced on his lap. On top of that sat a loose sheet of paper, pencil balanced between his fingers like he was about to take the most important exam of his life.

Steve paced the length of the room, a half-eaten apple slice between his fingers. His suspenders hung slightly loose over his narrow frame, and his brow was furrowed like he was preparing to debate the president himself.

"This is ridiculous," he mumbled for the third time, crunching into the slice. "I'm not makin' you a list like some… some schoolboy who's been caught cheating on a test."

Bucky grinned. "Well, technically, I am a schoolboy. And technically, I was cheatin', just not on a test."

Steve shot him a look sharp enough to kill. "That's not funny."

"Didn't say it was. Just true." Bucky bent over his paper, tongue poking out in concentration as he drew a crooked little star in the corner. His handwriting sprawled across the page in uneven loops. "Now, go on, Professor Rogers. Lay down the law."

Steve stopped pacing long enough to glare at him properly. "Professor? Oh, for cryin' out loud." He shoved another apple slice into his mouth and turned toward the fruit plate on the bed, picking up a piece of pear this time.

Bucky tapped his pencil against the paper impatiently. "C'mon, Stevie. Gimme somethin'. First commandment."

Steve sighed, chewing slowly, then raised a finger like he was lecturing a classroom. "Alright, fine. Number one. You stop makin' eyes at every girl in Brooklyn. You wanna flirt, flirt with a mirror. At least then you'll get the attention you're really after."

Bucky barked out a laugh, scribbling something half-readable onto the page. "'No makin' eyes at girls,' got it. And for the record, you're just jealous of my charm."

"Charm?" Steve scoffed, finally dragging the chair from Bucky's desk and sitting down, plate within reach. "You call makin' Evie Novak giggle like a hyena charm? Sounds more like a curse."

"Hyena?" Bucky nearly choked on his own laughter, clutching his pencil like it might break. "Aw, Stevie, you're killin' me."

Steve smirked around a bite of pear, settling back in the chair at Bucky's desk with his legs crossed at the ankles. "Good. Maybe then I'll get some peace and quiet."

Bucky shook his head, still grinning as he scribbled another note, adding a lopsided star to the margin. "Alright, next rule."

Steve pretended to think hard, tapping his chin like a default student in a comic. "Number two. No more drinkin' yourself stupid just to impress Richie Doyle."

Bucky groaned dramatically, tipping his head back. "Aw, come on. You're takin' away all my hobbies."

"Guess you'll have to find new ones," Steve shot back.

Bucky leaned over the page, muttering as he wrote. *No drinkin' with idiots.* The word *idiots* was underlined three times.

Steve tilted his head, snickering. "Your handwriting looks like it's losin' a fight."

"Hey now-" Bucky held up the paper defensively, revealing the crooked letters and uneven lines. "This is art, Rogers. Pure art."

"Looks like chicken scratch."

"Better than your math homework," Bucky countered, sticking out his tongue before bending back over the book, pencil moving.

Steve rolled his eyes, but his lips twitched. He reached for a slice of apple, biting into it as he leaned back in the chair, watching Bucky's face scrunch in concentration.

"Number three," Steve announced, voice mock-serious. "You don't make me feel like second place. Ever again. You get me?"

The room went quieter at that, the weight of his words pressing in.

Bucky's pencil slowed, his jaw tightening as he wrote more carefully this time. *Steve = always first place.* The star beside it was bigger, darker, like he meant it.

Steve's cheeks warmed. He ducked his head, pretending to fuss with the fruit plate. "That's not how I said it."

"Yeah, well, that's how I'm keepin' it," Bucky replied softly, not looking up.

Steve cleared his throat and reached for another apple slice, chewing thoughtfully. The jazz tune on the radio had shifted into something slower, softer, filling the silence.

"Number four," he said finally, trying to lighten the mood again. "You stop draggin' me to hangouts I don't wanna go to. Park, soda shops, whatever. If I say no, you listen."

Bucky raised his brows but obediently scribbled it down, tongue poking out again. *No draggin' Stevie to parties.*

Steve smirked. "You really look like a kid drawin' his first letters."

"Yeah? Well, you sound like my ma when she's lecturin' Becca about her lipstick."

Steve laughed despite himself, shaking his head. He popped the slice into his mouth and leaned back in his chair, watching Bucky's hair fall messily across his forehead, his big hands awkwardly cramped around the pencil, and thought, maybe this wasn't so ridiculous after all.

"Alright," Steve said after a long chew of the apple slice, pointing his finger at Bucky. "Number five. No hookin' up anymore."

Bucky froze mid-word, pencil hovering over the page. His head snapped up. "What? Like, at all?"

Steve gave him a look, flat and sharp as glass. "Don't test me, Barnes."

Bucky's lips twitched like he wanted to argue, but the memory of Steve's face on Sunday night, all flushed, soft, so sure, knocked the fight out of him. He sighed dramatically, like he was signing away his future. "Fine. No more hookin' up. You're killin' me here, though." He scribbled it down, the words sprawling across the page with an extra-

big star beside it.

Steve snorted. “You’ll survive.”

Bucky grumbled under his breath but kept writing.

“Next,” Steve said firmly, “you don’t get to act like a jealous fool every time a girl talks to me.”

Bucky’s pencil slipped, leaving a crooked line across the page. “I don’t-”

Steve raised a brow.

Bucky groaned. “Alright, maybe sometimes. But it’s ‘cause-”

“Write it down, Buck.”

With a huff, Bucky scribbled ‘*No gettin’ jealous when Stevie talks to girls*’ and added a little frown face beside it, as if to show how much he hated the rule.

Steve chuckled, chewing another pear slice. “And last one. No more fake promises. If you say somethin’, you mean it. Otherwise, don’t say it at all.”

This time, Bucky didn’t joke. His pencil scratched slower, steadier. *Only say things I mean*. He underlined it once, then added a small star beside it.

For a moment, silence filled the room, broken only by the soft croon of a trumpet on the radio. Steve’s gaze lingered on the page, on the crooked handwriting and silly stars, before he leaned forward suddenly and tugged the sheet from Bucky’s lap.

“Hey!” Bucky reached for it, but Steve pulled it back, sliding onto the bed beside him with a smirk. “What’re you-”

“Your handwriting’s barbaric,” Steve said matter-of-factly, grabbing the pencil from Bucky’s fingers. He held the paper against his knee and bent over it. “Here, lemme fix it up.”

Bucky tilted his head, amused, watching the blond scribble neat little notes beside his messy rules. “You makin’ edits to my masterpiece?”

“More like savin’ it.” Steve stuck his tongue out slightly as he wrote in his careful, precise handwriting. *Respect. No more lies. No makin’ Steve*

second place.

At the bottom of the page, he paused, then quickly sketched two tiny figures. One tall and messy-haired, one shorter with suspenders drawn on. Above their heads, he drew a little speech bubble over the shorter one. *Don't be dumb, Buck.*

Bucky snorted, leaning closer to look. "That's supposed to be me?"

Steve smirked. "Yeah. Notice how yours has messy hair? Very accurate."

"Looks more like a scarecrow," Bucky teased, bumping his shoulder against Steve's.

Steve elbowed him lightly. "Shut up." He added one more doodle. A lopsided heart levitated over both their heads now before setting the pencil down.

Bucky's grin softened as he studied the page. Then he glanced at Steve, his blue eyes filling with something warmer. "So… this is it? Your rules for me?"

Steve shifted against the headboard, crossing his arms. "You wanted a list. That's the list."

Bucky hesitated, then asked with a cocky grin he couldn't quite hide, "Does this mean we're official now?"

Steve gave him a long look, his lips twitching fondly. "You're impossible."

"Yeah, but answer the question," Bucky pressed, leaning in closer, their knees bumping against each other's.

Steve sighed, tilting his head back against the wall, his blond hair catching a streak of sunlight through the blinds. "We're… somethin', Buck. Complicated. Twisted. Not official."

"But kinda are," Bucky added eagerly.

Steve's eyes slid over to him, the corner of his mouth lifting. "Yeah. Kinda are."

That grin, bright, boyish, a little smug, spread over Bucky's face like he'd just won the lottery. He flopped back against the pillows, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. "I'll take it. Complicated,

twisted, and kinda official. Has a nice ring to it."

Steve shook his head, laughing quietly, and leaned over to snatch another apple slice from the plate. "You're ridiculous."

"Maybe," Bucky shot back without missing a beat.

Steve rolled his eyes, but his smile lingered as he chewed, their shoulders brushing lightly where they sat side by side, the silly paper lying between them like some strange contract. Half rules, half doodles, and all theirs.

Chapter 7: Chapter 7

Wednesday, April 26th, 1940 - 56 days left

The yard was alive with noise, the kind of midday chaos that came with late spring settling into Brooklyn. Sun warmed the green-painted metal tables, students yelling across the yard, laughter breaking through the hum of chatter. It was almost May, the air sweet with blooming trees and the faint tang of gasoline from passing cars on the main road nearby. Somewhere behind the gym, a basketball thudded against pavement, punctuated by shouts of victory and groans of defeat.

At their usual bench, the guys were already spread out like they owned the place. Mickey had his elbows sprawled wide, halfway through retelling some football play that no one except Joey cared about, and Joey cared a little too much. His crooked teeth flashed as he laughed, green eyes wrinkling at the corners. Charlie, half-listening to everyone, leaned back with a cigarette dangling loose between two fingers and his wallet flipped open on the table, counting the dollar bills for the sportsbet office later.

Bucky strolled up with Steve at his side, and he carried his mother's carefully packed lunch under one arm. Beside him, Steve kept pace with his usual quiet determination, his algebra book still tucked under his arm like it was glued there.

"Look who finally showed," Mickey called, lifting his chin in greeting.

"Had to drag Rogers outta the library," Bucky shot back easily, sliding onto the bench. Steve settled beside him, careful as always, but close enough that their knees brushed beneath the table. A quiet, accidental contact. At least that's what they pretended it was.

Before Steve could even unwrap his book, Evie Novak appeared. Blonde curls bouncing, bright blue eyes set on Bucky like he was the only one in the yard. She perched at the edge of the bench with all the confidence of someone who knew her place in a boy's crowd.

"Barnes," she sang, "you didn't call me back yesterday."

Normally, Bucky would've smirked, let her bait him, and said something smooth about fighting off the line of girls outside his window. But today? Today, he just gave her a crooked half-smile as he

unwrapped his sandwich. “Yeah, been busy.”

Steve almost choked on air. Busy? That was it?

Evie blinked, clearly not used to being brushed off, but she recovered with a tilt of her chin. “Too busy for me?” she teased, leaning in close enough that her perfume drifted across the table.

Bucky didn’t bite. Instead, he tore his sandwich in half and slid the larger piece toward Steve. “Here. Ma packed too much again.”

Steve froze, staring at the food as though it were a trap, then looked up at Bucky. His expression flickered to confusion, gratitude, something softer he couldn’t quite disguise. He took it slowly, muttering, “Thanks, Buck,” as if it meant nothing. But the faint pink blooming at his ears betrayed him.

“You’re sharin’ and rejecting girls?” Richie barked a laugh. “What, Barnes turned saint overnight?”

“Somethin’ like that,” Bucky shrugged, leaning back against the bench like it was no big deal. He popped a grape from the little paper bag into his mouth, chewing lazily. “Ma’s makin’ me read the Bible again. Says I gotta clean up my soul or somethin’.”

That earned a roar of laughter. Joey nearly spat out his soda while Mickey arched a

brow. “You? Readin’ the Bible?”

“Swear on it,” Bucky said, lips twitching. The truth was his old Bible still sat gathering dust on the shelf with his books, untouched for years. Last time he’d flipped through it, he was maybe 10 years old. Valeria had been beside him, her soft Romanian accent wrapping around the words until the verses sounded like lullabies. She’d believed in all of it. He didn’t, not really. But maybe trying to be better was his own version of prayer.

Evie’s lips curved into a sly smile. “So you’ve turned holy, huh? No more girls, Bucky?”

The whole table erupted, whistles and teasing piling onto each other. Mickey nudged Bucky’s arm with a grin. “She’s got ya cornered, man.”

Bucky just rolled his eyes, chewing another grape slowly. “Told ya. Changed man. Saint Barnes.”

“More like Saint Liar,” Richie shot back, and the laughter rose again.

But Bucky didn’t rise to it, not this time. Instead, his gaze slid sideways, caught on Steve. Steve, who was chewing his half of the sandwich, shoulders hunched as though he didn’t quite belong at the table despite being invited there every day. His face was calm, but his eyes were sharp, thoughtful, and flicked toward Bucky for just a second. And in that glance, there it was. The truth. Skepticism, yes. But also something else. Something warmer, harder to hide.

Bucky looked away first, pretending to be distracted by Joey’s joke. He let Evie’s hand brush his sleeve and ignored it. Laughed when he was supposed to, smirked when the group expected it, but his mind stayed fixed on Steve.

For now, this “saint” act was enough. A promise he wasn’t sure he could keep, but one he wanted to.

And Steve noticed. He always noticed.

—

The bell rang across the yard, scattering groups of teens like startled pigeons, all hurrying toward the brick school building. Inside, the hallways erupted with the usual midday rush. Voices echoed off tile, shoes clattered, lockers slammed shut in sharp bursts like gunfire.Bucky and Steve walked away from the crowd, slipping through the *BOYS* door, its black letters chipped and peeling after many years.

The restroom was the same as always. Bleach and old pipes undercut by the faint bite of cigarette smoke, some kid hadn’t bothered to hide well enough last period. White porcelain urinals lined one wall, sinks with cracked mirrors the other. The buzzing lights overhead flickered every so often, a tired heartbeat for the whole room.

A couple of upperclassmen lingered near the sinks, talking football and trading half-hearted insults. They barely glanced at Bucky and Steve before heading out, the heavy door squeaking shut behind them.

Steve finished at a urinal, buttoning his brown trousers, tugging his suspenders into place. His shirt was wrinkled, always wrinkled, and he shuffled toward the sinks. He caught Bucky leaning there like he owned the place, one palm braced against porcelain, the other dragging through his messy dark hair.

Barnes squinted at his reflection, trying to smooth the waves into something slick with spit-wet fingers, but they sprang back rebelliously the moment he let go.

Steve smirked faintly as he turned on the faucet. “That’s not workin’, Buck. Your ma’s right. You need a trim.”

“Trim’s for losers,” Bucky shot back without missing a beat, but his grin crooked in Steve’s direction in the mirror. “Besides, girls like it messy.”

Steve snorted, drying his hands on the rough paper towel from the dispenser. “Thought you were a saint now. Girls aren’t your thing anymore, remember?”

“Saint Barnes can still look good,” Bucky said, slowly ruffling his hair worse. “What, you want me to shave it off, go full monk? Start wearin’ robes?”

Steve rolled his eyes but couldn’t hide the way his mouth twitched upward. “Wouldn’t hurt to try. Bet Evie would love that.”

That earned him a sharp glance in the mirror. “What’s with you and Evie, huh?”

“I don’t like her,” Steve said flatly, leaning against the sink beside him. “She talks too loud, brags too much, and doesn’t know when to quit. And I don’t like the way she looks at you.”

Bucky chuckled, the sound low and teasing. “Jealous, Rogers?”

Steve’s glare was sharp, but his silence said more than words. Instead of answering, he changed the subject. “Her old man runs that car shop down on Fourth Avenue, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Bucky replied, fiddling with his rolled-up sleeves. “Ma knows him. Says he’s Polish, came over after the last war. Always tips his hat, holds doors. You know how she eats that stuff up.”

Steve’s jaw worked as he muttered, “Charged Ma twice what we paid at Benny’s for the same job. Doesn’t sit right.”

“Guy’s gotta make a livin’,” Bucky shrugged. “Polite goes a long way.”

“Polite don’t mean honest,” Steve shot back, tearing another paper towel just to give his hands something to do.

Bucky smirked, nudging his shoulder. “Look at you, Mr. Detective. What’re you gonna do, march down there and give him the ol’ Rogers speech on fairness?”

Steve flushed, standing straighter, chin tilting. “Maybe I should.”

“Sure,” Bucky said, laughter in his voice. “You, standin’ on a crate just so he can see you over the counter…”

“Shut up,” Steve muttered, but his lips betrayed him, twitching with a smile. He lingered at the sink, arms folded now, eyes narrowing. “So. You and Evie.”

Bucky flicked him a glance in the mirror, brows raised. “What d’you mean?”

“You know what I mean.” Steve shifted his weight. “She follows you around like a puppy. And you didn’t exactly push her away until now.”

Bucky smirked, turning to lean his hip against the sink. “You sound like my ma. Want me to bring her flowers, too?”

“Cut it out.” Steve’s voice dropped, edged with something raw. “I’m askin’.”

For a beat, Bucky only studied him. Then, with a sudden burst of mischief, he cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled toward the tiled ceiling, “Anyone in here?”

His voice echoed, bouncing off the walls. Silence followed. No footsteps, no doors. Satisfied, he turned back to Steve, grinning. “Good. Don’t wanna give the fellas free entertainment.”

Steve scowled, shoving his shoulder. “Idiot.”

Bucky laughed, the sound rich and careless, but then his grin slipped into something thoughtful. “Alright, you wanna know? Fine. Evie and I. Yeah. Twice.”

Steve’s chest tightened. “Twice still hits a little when I think about it.”

“Mm-hm.” Bucky shrugged, casual as if he were talking about homework. “At her place. Big ol’ house, by the way. You ever been? Looks like a palace. Pink curtains, a rug thick enough you sink right into it. Girl’s got a princess room. Anyway, one night we’re up there

on her bed, she's got me naked."

Steve stiffened, fists clenching around the edge of the sink. "Buck-"

"Relax," Bucky chuckled, waving him off. "I'm tellin' you. She wanted to… y'know. *Do it*. She's sittin' there on her bed, lookin' at me like I'm some kinda prize she just won. And me?" He leaned in, lowering his voice like he was about to confess a secret. "Nothin'. Absolutely nothin'. Didn't get hard. She's sittin' there rubbin', kissin', whisperin' stuff in my ear. Whole nine yards. Still nothin'. Dead as a doornail."

Steve blinked, caught between shock and disbelief. "What?"

"Yup." Bucky popped the 'p', smirking again but not quite meeting Steve's eyes. "Couldn't get hard to save my life. Gave her some excuse. 'Stress at home,' I said. Pfft. Dumbest thing I ever came up with." He shook his head, laughing softly at his own story. "Not sure if she bought it."

Steve's brow furrowed. "And you don't think that's… weird?"

Bucky shrugged again, rolling his shoulders as if shaking off the weight. "Eh. Happens. She seemed… disappointed, I guess, but not enough to throw me out. I mean, c'mon. Look at me." He flashed a crooked grin, but there was a trace of something else there. Embarrassment, maybe, or nerves, hidden under the confident, cocky surface.

Steve didn't smile back. He couldn't. His thoughts churned, circling the image of Bucky lying in some pink bed with Evie Novak. All naked, her hands on him, and nothing happening. It should have been funny. Bucky thought it was funny. But for Steve, it wasn't. It was confusing, disorienting. He wanted to say no, that it wasn't normal, that maybe it meant something else. Something Bucky was refusing to look at. But he kept his mouth shut.

"You ever think maybe it's not stress?" Steve asked carefully, almost too quietly.

Bucky tilted his head, blue eyes narrowing. "What're you gettin' at?"

Steve stuttered, heat climbing his neck. "Nothin'. Just… I dunno. Doesn't sound like you."

Bucky stared at him for a long second, then barked out a laugh and gave Steve another shove on the shoulder. "Christ, Rogers. You worry

too much. Drop it, yeah?"

Steve didn't drop it. Not really.

The second bell rang down the hall, finally ending the conversation that was starting to become more and more awkward. Steve groaned. "Chemistry."

Bucky perked up instantly, pushing off the sink. "Finally somethin' I'm good at. C'mon, I'll carry you through it."

"You can't say that about every subject that isn't about writing essays." Steve shoved his way toward the door. "Doesn't make it less miserable."

Bucky grabbed his books, following with that easy grin that always made trouble feel like less of a burden. "Hey, if I ace the test, you ace the test. That's how it works when you sit next to me."

"That's not how it works at all," Steve muttered, pushing the heavy door open.

"Trust me," Bucky said, slinging his arm briefly across Steve's narrow shoulders as they merged into the hallway tide. "With me around? It does."

Chapter 8: Chapter 8

Thursday, April 27th, 1940 - 55 days left

Thursday mornings always felt lighter somehow, like even the brick walls of the school loosened their grip, knowing the week was almost over. The Barnes car rolled to a stop in the parking lot, its dark red paint catching the sun. Rebecca, perfect curls pinned back, red dress and matching heels on her perfectly pedicured feet, snapped her compact mirror shut as she turned to her younger brother in the backseat.

“You better not call for me again in the halls today, Bucky,” she warned, already stepping out of the car with a click of her heels.

Bucky followed her out, grinning widely as he swung his satchel over one shoulder. “Aw, c’mon, Becca. You love it when people stare.”

She gasped and swatted him across the arm, the smack sharp but playful. “You’re annoying, and I will never ever borrow you money for lunch again, just so you know.”

“Yeah, but I’m your little brother. You’re forced to take care of me and make sure I have money for lunch,” he shot back before she rolled her eyes and walked off, waving at her group of dolled-up friends waiting by the front steps.

Steve climbed out of the car more quietly, tugging at the suspenders over his brown pants, and shut the door gently behind him. Valeria leaned across the front seat to smile at him through the open passenger window. “Have a good day, boys. Study hard.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for the ride,” Steve said politely, earning her soft smile before she pulled away.

As soon as the car disappeared down the street, Bucky slung an arm around Steve’s shoulders, tugging him toward the familiar knot of boys gathering by the wall at their usual morning spot. The group wasn’t complete yet. Mickey hadn’t shown, and Charlie was probably running late again, still fumbling through his morning smoke somewhere. But Joey was there, waving as they approached, and Richie leaned against the fence with his ginger hair catching the sunlight.

“Morning!” Richie called, clapping him on the shoulder when Bucky got close. “Perfect timing. We were just talkin’ about tomorrow night.”

“What’s tomorrow night?” Bucky asked, grinning already, like he knew whatever it was, he was going to love it.

“The dance hall on Twelfth finally reopened,” Joey said, eyes bright. “Big band, live brass, girls, the works. Place don’t ask for IDs either. You just order and they pour.”

“Get outta here,” Bucky said, eyes sparking. “That old hall? Thought they shut it down for good after that fire.”

“New paint, new band,” Richie said. “Whole thing’s buzzin’. Everyone’s goin’. It’s the place to be this weekend.”

Bucky slapped Joey on the back. “Hell yes, I’m in. You kiddin’? Live band, pretty dames, and booze that don’t taste like Mickey’s basement? That’s heaven.”

Steve, standing a step behind, shifted uncomfortably. “Not really my scene,” he muttered.

Bucky turned instantly, slinging his arm around Steve’s shoulders again, tugging him forward into the circle. “Sure it is. Rogers, you’ll look sharp in your Sunday shoes, cut a rug with some girls. Or just stand in the corner with me when I’m takin’ a breather. Either way, you’re comin’.”

The fact that Bucky could so effortlessly, so shamelessly, break three rules in the span of a single sentence was almost impressive in its own twisted way. Steve just stared at him for a moment, then let out a heavy sigh, the kind that carried both disappointment and resignation. He had really, honestly thought Bucky was going to do better this time. Thought maybe this whole “new man, changed guy, turnin’ over a fresh leaf” act would stick longer than a week. But here he was again, proving that habits like his didn’t just die hard, they came back louder, cockier, and with that damn grin Steve couldn’t stay mad at for long… even when he wanted to.

“Buck-” Steve started, but Joey jumped in, grinning.

“C’mon, Steve. It’s a band. Real swing, not the junk we got on the radio half the time. You’ll like it.”

Steve frowned, glancing between them all. He could already feel the

excuses forming. His ma needed him home, right? He hated being packed shoulder to shoulder in a sweaty crowd. Dancing wasn't his strong suit either. But Bucky's hand was firm on his shoulder, his grin bright like he'd already won.

"You comin', Rogers," Bucky said, voice low but confident. "What, you gonna sit at home with your sketchbook while the rest of Brooklyn's havin' fun?"

"Maybe," Steve muttered, though his lips twitched upward at the corner.

"No maybes." Bucky leaned close, blue eyes glinting. "You're comin'. That's final."

Steve sighed, knowing resistance was useless. He'd spent too many years trying to argue with James Buchanan Barnes. "Fine. But if I trip on my own feet, I'm blamin' you."

The group erupted in laughter. Joey clapped him on the back. "That's the spirit."

Richie whistled low. "Never thought I'd see Rogers at a dance hall."

Bucky smirked, squeezing Steve's shoulder before letting go. "Stick with me, pal. You'll have a good time."

The bell rang then, pulling them toward the front steps. Rebecca passed by with her group of friends, rolling her eyes when Bucky called after her, "Don't trip in those heels, sis!" She huffed and disappeared inside, leaving him grinning smugly.

Steve just shook his head, muttering something under his breath as they headed into the building together.

Bucky still smiled, already thinking about Saturday night, about the music, the lights, the chance to show Rogers that the world wasn't half as scary when you were in the midst of it with him.

—

The hallway was crowded, laughter bouncing off the lockers as Bucky, Steve, and Joey made their way toward algebra. Charlie was just ahead, arms full of books, when his shoe caught on a satchel someone had left sprawled across the floor. He yelped, nearly face-planting, but somehow caught himself against the wall.

“Nice save, man!” Bucky called, laughing.

“Yeah, real graceful,” Joey added, grinning wide as Charlie turned red and hurried into the classroom. Steve cracked the smallest smile, shaking his head as he followed behind the two louder boys.

Inside, the familiar smell of chalk and old wood filled the room. The blackboard was still full of notes from yesterday’s lesson, and the desks were lined neatly in their rows. Steve made for the back like always, but before he could slip past, a hand hooked his shirt and tugged him back.

“Not so fast,” Bucky said, grinning as he pulled Steve toward the first row.

Steve blinked, tugging at his shirt to free himself. “What’re you doing, Buck?”

“Detour,” Bucky said easily. He guided him right to where Dot Miller and Peggy Carter were already seated, books neatly stacked, pencils lined up. Peggy’s dark hair was curled just so, a pale blue dress pressed crisp, while Dot looked sweet as always in a yellow cardigan with her Bible peeking out from her satchel.

Joey joined in without hesitation and leaned an elbow on Dot’s desk. “So, ladies, you heard about the dance hall that reopened on Twelfth?” His voice dipped smoother, his grin practiced. “Saturday night. Gonna be the place to be.”

Dot blushed, glancing down at her notebook. “I… I don’t know if my folks would approve.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Joey coaxed. “It’s just a dance. Music, laughter. You can bring some of your friends if you like.”

Bucky jumped in, smirking. “Yeah, tell all the girls you know. Place is big enough. The more, the merrier.” He winked at Dot, then caught himself, biting down on the instinct to keep pushing. Rules, he reminded himself. He had rules now.

Peggy arched a brow, her British accent cutting clean through the noise of guys settling in their seats. “I assume you will be there, Bucky? Somehow I can’t imagine a dance without you at the center of it.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Bucky said smoothly. Then, before Steve could

sneak away unnoticed, Bucky tugged him closer by the sleeve, practically presenting him like a prize. “And Rogers here’s comin’ too. Best dancer in Brooklyn, you’ll see.”

Steve’s face flushed crimson. “Buck.”

The girls laughed, and Peggy’s eyes lingered warmly on him. “Oh? Well, that’s settled, then. I’ll come. If nothing else, I’ll have a no-alcohol partner in crime.”

“You have Dot,” Steve muttered, not even bothering to hide the side-eye to Bucky as he crossed his arms. The implication hung there, loud and obvious. Why him? She had church girl Dot right next to her.

Bucky rolled his eyes like he’d heard this argument a hundred times already. He stepped closer, invading Steve’s personal space on purpose, a grin firmly in place. “Quit that, Stevie. The lady wants you to come.”

Joey laughed, shaking his head. “Look at that, Rogers. Already makin’ new friends.”

Steve ducked his head, but there was a little glow in his chest at being noticed for once. Peggy’s smile was kind, not mocking. For a second, he almost forgot Bucky was still gripping his sleeve like a leash.

“Alright, we’ll see you there,” Bucky said charmingly, guiding Steve away before he could respond. They moved to their usual desk at the back. Bucky dropped into his seat with a dramatic sigh, rolling his eyes as he mimicked Peggy’s crisp accent under his breath. “Oh, I’ll come, since Steve’s there.”

Steve slid into his chair beside him, hiding a smirk. “Don’t start.”

“Don’t start what?” Bucky asked, a sour expression lingering as he slouched in his seat.

Steve glanced sideways at him, his voice quiet but firm. “Rule number six. No jealousy, remember?”

Bucky groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face. “She was makin’ eyes at you, Rogers. You didn’t see it?”

Steve raised a brow. “What, you’re allowed to flirt with half the school, but the minute someone’s nice to me-”

“I wasn’t flirtin’,” Bucky cut in quickly, jaw tightening.

Steve let him stew for a beat before softening, lips quirking. “Relax, Buck. I’m not takin’ her home.”

That earned a huffed laugh out of Bucky despite himself. He tipped his chair back, balancing on two legs, and muttered, “Still don’t like it.”

Steve turned to pull his book from his satchel, fighting the smile tugging at his mouth. Something about seeing Bucky, James Buchanan Barnes, squirm in his seat for him, it wasn’t bad at all.

Their algebra teacher strode into the room with his sleeves rolled up and chalk dust already smudged on his vest. He clapped his hands once, commanding the chatter to die down.

“Alright, everyone, eyes up front. Exam’s next week, and most of you can’t afford to fail unless you’re looking forward to summer school.” He gave a pointed look at a couple of specific bad students. “So today, you’ll be working in pairs. Review sheets are on the desk. Partner up, and I expect to see work on paper, not just fooling around.”

The class groaned collectively, chairs scraping against the floor as papers were passed down the rows.

Bucky snagged two sheets and slid one toward Steve with a grin. “Guess that’s us, pal.”

Steve eyed the page with visible dread, already overwhelmed by the rows of numbers and symbols. “Great,” he muttered, pencil tapping nervously against his desk.

“Don’t look like that,” Bucky said, leaning back comfortably in his chair. He scanned the first problem in under a second, scribbled down some numbers, and circled the answer. “See? Easy.”

Steve frowned at the mess of work on Bucky’s paper. “You didn’t even explain it.”

“’Cause I’m tryin’ to impress you with my geniusness,” Bucky said with mock arrogance, flashing a smirk.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Not funny.”

“Come on, lemme show you.” Bucky dragged Steve’s paper closer and tapped the first problem. “Look. It’s just distributive property. You

multiply here, then add. Like this."

Steve leaned in, brows knitted, trying to follow as Bucky scribbled step by step. His pencil hovered over his own sheet, hesitant. "So… I do it like this?" He scratched out some numbers, then stopped. "Wait, that can't be right."

Bucky tilted his head, studying Steve's work. "Close. You just forgot to flip the sign when you moved it over." He erased lightly, fixing the mistake. "There. Now you got it."

Steve gave a quiet sigh. "Feels like every time I get one thing right, I mess up the next."

"Yeah, but that's why you got me," Bucky said easily, nudging his shoulder. "We'll get you through it."

Steve looked at him skeptically. "You make it sound like climbing a mountain."

Bucky smirked. "For you, it kinda is. Tiny legs, big climb."

Steve let out a sharp laugh, swatting at him with his pencil. "Jerk."

The sound drew a glance from Peggy, a few rows up. She looked back at them with a small smile before turning back to her own paper. Bucky noticed but didn't comment. He was too busy enjoying the fact that Steve was laughing instead of scowling at the math sheet.

"Alright, let's try number two together," Bucky said, pointing with his pencil. "Go ahead, you start this one."

Steve chewed his lip, carefully setting his pencil to the paper. He muttered as he worked, "Multiply here, subtract here…" He hesitated, glancing sideways at Bucky.

"Keep goin'," Bucky encouraged softly. "You're on the right track."

Steve finally scribbled down an answer, then leaned back. "It looks wrong."

Bucky compared it to his own work, then grinned. "Wrong? Buddy, that's perfect. Nailed it."

Steve blinked. "Really?"

"Yeah, really." Bucky gave him a little shove. "See? You're smarter

than you think."

Steve's chest warmed at the words, though he tried to hide it with a shrug. "Only 'cause you're walking me through it."

"That's the idea." Bucky leaned in closer, lowering his voice. "Listen, we'll practice after school tomorrow and next week. My place. I'll help you study till you're sick of me. No way I'm lettin' you flunk this thing."

Steve glanced at him, caught off guard by the sincerity in his voice. "You'd do that?"

"Of course I would." Bucky grinned, leaning back like it was nothing. "You're my guy, Stevie. Always gonna look out for you."

Steve ducked his head quickly, pretending to focus on the next problem so Bucky wouldn't see the faint blush rising on his cheeks. "Alright then… guess you're stuck tutoring me."

"Wouldn't have it any other way," Bucky said with a smirk, spinning his pencil between his fingers.

Chapter 9: Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> Enjoy this really long chapter and possibly the last few soft-only moments we get to see of these two babies. Stay tuned :) Thank you for reading so far, and hopefully I'll see you next week with more updates. Perhaps even this weekend, we'll see how badly school messes up my wellbeing, duh. Hopefully, the few new chappies keep you entertained for now and manage to catch your attention. Maybe the whole setup is a little long and not too special, but as the tag already says: It starts slow and goes downhill even faster.
> Love you all! <3

Friday, April 28th, 1940 - 54 days left

The final bell of the day rang like a blessing, the echo bouncing through the brick hallways. Chairs scraped back, papers shuffled, voices rose all at once as half the school spilled into the corridor, relieved to finally be free and enter the weekend.

Steve gathered his books slowly, tucking his algebra notes carefully into the worn folder that already had tape holding the edges together. Bucky, as always, was less careful. He shoved things into his satchel, half the zipper hanging open. He threw an arm casually around Steve's shoulders once they were in the hallway, steering him toward the double doors.

"Alright," Bucky said with a grin, "operation 'Don't Let Rogers Fail Algebra' is a go. I'll even make flashcards for you. You'll be beggin' for mercy by dinnertime."

Steve smirked faintly. "You makin' flashcards? I'll believe that when I see it. Last time you tried that, you just drew cartoons of Richie with a beer bottle for a head."

Bucky laughed loudly, the sound bouncing off the lockers. "What can I say? It was art. You gotta appreciate that."

Steve shook his head, hiding a smile as he adjusted the strap of his bag. "Your art wouldn't exactly get me into college."

"No, but my brains might keep you outta summer school," Bucky shot

back smoothly, nudging him. “Don’t worry. Tonight, we’ll go over enough problems that you’ll be dreamin’ equations in your sleep.”

Steve gave him a sidelong look. “And then what? Go out dancin’ like nothin’ happened?”

“Exactly!” Bucky said, grinning widely. “Brains first, party second. That’s balance, Stevie. It’s how I keep lookin’ this good.”

Steve rolled his eyes but couldn’t hide the small laugh that slipped out. For a moment, it was just them moving with the crowd, talking like they always did, as if the noise and chaos of high school blurred away when it was just the two of them.

Then…

“Bucky!”

Bucky froze for a second before he turned his head. Steve already knew who it was. Evie Novak was striding toward them, pushing through masses of students with her characteristic confidence.

Her curls bounced with every step, and she had her books hugged tight to her chest. Navy skirt, pale blouse with puffed sleeves, lipstick a little too red for school hours. She smiled at Bucky like he was the only one in the crowded hallway worth looking at.

Steve felt his stomach tighten, that old familiar feeling of irritation that formed whenever he saw the pretty blonde.

“Bucky,” Evie said again, her voice softer now that she was in front of them. “What are you wearing tomorrow night?”

Bucky blinked, thrown off. “Wearing?”

“For the dance,” she said, tilting her head just so. “I mean… You didn’t change your mind about going, did you?”

Of course, Evie Novak had heard about the dance hall plans by now. Not from Bucky, though, which really should’ve told her something. Maybe she just chose not to read into it. Or maybe she ignored the signs on purpose. Either way, it was very Evie Novak of her.

Bucky gave a half-shrug, easy and nonchalant. “Nah, I’ll be there.”

Steve’s throat went dry. This was it. The kind of moment where Bucky usually went full ladiesman mode. A joke, a grin, some sneaky

comment to keep Evie on his hook. That was their pattern. Evie asked, Bucky teased, and Steve… well, Steve swallowed his feelings like medicine and pretended it didn't matter.

But not today.

"Don't know yet what I'll wear," Bucky said casually, tightening his arm slightly around Steve's shoulders instead of stepping closer to her. "Probably just a shirt that ain't got food stains on it. I'm not exactly planning to do matching outfits with ya, Novak."

Evie blinked, the edges of her painted lips dropping. "Really? That's all?"

"Yup," Bucky said with a grin that didn't quite invite her in. "Gonna be too busy makin' sure my buddy here doesn't trip over his own feet on the dance floor." He squeezed Steve's shoulder, almost protectively.

Steve's heart stuttered.

"If I'd wanted to go with you, I would've asked you, no?"

Wow. That was colder than necessary.

Evie narrowed her eyes just a bit, hurt flashing there. "Hm. Funny, yesterday at lunch you practically… well, let's just say you weren't exactly sweet to me. Now you're just… rude. What's that about?"

Normally, Bucky would've turned it into a joke, maybe thrown her a wink and smoothed things over with half a promise. But today, he just shrugged. "Guess I'm done playin' games, Evie." His tone was light, but the weight of the words was there.

Her painted lips parted, clearly not used to him turning her down so flat. "You're unbelievable," she huffed after a moment, spinning on her heel to disappear back into the crowd of students.

Steve stood frozen, staring up at Bucky in disbelief. "You… you didn't flirt back."

Bucky glanced down at him, a smirk tugging at his mouth. "Course I didn't."

Steve blinked, almost disoriented. "You always do."

"Yeah, well." Bucky scratched at the back of his neck with his free hand. "Some things ain't worth messin' up. And besides," He gave

Steve a grin, softer this time, less of a performance. “I got rules to follow now, don’t I?”

For once, Steve didn’t feel the sting of being overshadowed. Instead, warmth spread through his chest.

“Guess so,” he murmured, and for the first time in a long time, he didn’t feel like second place.

They pushed through the front doors into the late spring air, the sun hitting their heads of messy hair and faces. Bucky was already blabbing bout how they’d study first, then eat, then get ready for the dance. Steve listened quietly, a faint smile tugging at his lips. Maybe Bucky was changing for real this time…

—

Steve’s room always felt even smaller when Bucky was in it, sprawled across the narrow bed like he owned the place. The mattress dipped under him, his long legs taking up too much space, one socked foot bouncing lazily in the air while the other rested on the floor.

The smell of tomato sauce still lingered faintly in the air, sharp and cheap but comforting, the kind of pasta two boys who couldn’t cook much beyond boiling some water could manage. Their empty bowls sat at the foot of the bed, spoons clinking whenever one of them shifted.

Steve had a pencil in hand, algebra notes scattered across his lap, but he wasn’t fooling anyone. His brow was furrowed, his lips pressed into a tight line, the tip of his tongue poking out as he tried to focus on the numbers.

“This one’s easy,” Bucky said, leaning on one elbow, his dark hair a mess across his forehead. He pointed to Steve’s paper with his pencil, tapping lightly. “You just gotta move the two over, then divide both sides. Boom, done.”

Steve squinted. “Easy for you,” he muttered. “If math was drawin’ pictures, maybe I’d-”

“You’d ace it,” Bucky interrupted with a grin. “I know, Stevie. But you don’t need to ace this. You just need to pass. That’s where I come in as your very own handsome tutor.”

Steve rolled his eyes but smiled despite himself. He pushed the notes

aside, leaning back against the wall. “You’re full of yourself, you know that?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said easily, flashing that grin again. “But you love me anyway.”

Steve opened his mouth to reply, but instead his gaze shifted to the bowls, still sitting on the edge of the bed. With a sigh, he grabbed both in his hands and moved to stand up.

“Hold up, what’re you doin’?” Bucky asked, pushing up on his elbow.

“Gonna put these in the kitchen before I spill ’em,” Steve replied, carefully balancing the bowls.

But he didn’t get far. Bucky sat up fast, reached out, and caught him by the waist. In one smooth motion, he tugged Steve backward until the blond stumbled, the bowls clinking together as they nearly slipped from his grip. Steve let out a surprised yelp as Bucky pulled him right down into his lap.

“Bucky!” Steve hissed, the bowls wobbling. He managed to set them down safely on the nightstand before they made a disaster of the old rug under his feet.

Bucky chuckled, warm and low, his chin brushing Steve’s shoulder. “Better,” he murmured, arms circling loosely around Steve’s waist. “You’re always tryin’ to run off when I’m enjoyin’ your company.”

Steve turned his head just enough to glance at him, cheeks flushed, lips twitching. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Mm. Maybe.” Bucky’s grin widened as he spotted a smear of sauce on Steve’s chin. Without thinking, he rubbed it off with his thumb, then, before Steve could react, pressed a playful kiss to the same spot.

Steve giggled, actually giggled, the sound light and rare, making something tug deep in Bucky’s chest.

“See? That’s better than algebra,” Bucky teased, nuzzling closer.

Steve shook his head, trying to hide his laugh, but then froze when Bucky’s lips brushed the curve of his neck. The laughter dissolved into a sharp inhale.

“Buck…” he whispered, but it came out more like a sigh than a

protest.

“Mm?”

Bucky kissed his neck again, slower this time, his mouth lingering. Then he let his teeth scrape gently against Steve’s skin, catching the sensitive spot just above his collarbone. Steve’s head tilted without him even meaning to, revealing more of his throat to the other boy.

“Bucky…” Steve’s voice was softer now, shaky.

Bucky smirked against his skin, sucking lightly until a faint mark formed. He shifted, sliding one arm firmer around Steve’s waist, the other steadying them on the bed. Steve squirmed, his hands clutching at Bucky’s forearm for balance.

“You’re gonna- leave a mark,” Steve managed, voice cracking mid-sentence.

“Good,” Bucky murmured, kissing lower, pressing another warm, slow mark into the curve of Steve’s shoulder where the collar of his shirt had slipped aside. “Let ’em know you’re mine.”

Steve’s eyes fluttered shut, a shaky laugh spilling out of him. He leaned back slightly against Bucky’s chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath the boy’s shirt. His skin tingled where Bucky’s mouth had been, every kiss leaving little trails of warmth.

“Buck, we- we’re supposed to be studyin’,” Steve said weakly, though he didn’t make a move to leave his lap.

Bucky grinned, lips brushing his ear now. “This is studyin’. Anatomy.”

Steve groaned, burying his face in his hands, but the smile tugging at his lips gave him away. He lowered his hands just enough to glance sideways at Bucky, his blue eyes soft but exasperated.

“You’re impossible,” Steve whispered.

“And you’re blushin’ like crazy,” Bucky shot back, kissing the tip of Steve’s red ear. “Don’t deny it.”

Steve laughed, hiding his face again, but he didn’t move away. If anything, he leaned back just a little more into the circle of Bucky’s arms, letting himself stay right there.

“You still got that tin of Vaseline around?” Bucky asked suddenly,

lifting his face just enough away from Steve's neck so the boy could still feel the warmth of his breath.

Steve froze, his stomach doing a tiny backflip. He knew exactly what that seemingly innocent question meant. Nothing about it was innocent. Nothing.

"We're supposed to be studyin'," Steve muttered again, trying desperately to sound stern and failing miserably as his face heated up.

Bucky's grin widened, mischievous and confident all at once. He cupped Steve's chin with one hand, tilting his gaze so their eyes locked. "Oh, what now? Your Ma isn't coming back any time soon, so what are ya scared of, Stevie?"

Steve cleared his throat, his fingers fiddling with the hem of his shirt. "Uh… I can't fail that exam, y'know?"

Bucky's laugh was low and teasing. "Exam, shmexam. Who are you trying to fool, huh? You think I don't see through your innocent act?"

He gently pushed Steve off his thighs, moving him to sit beside him on the creaking bed. "Okay," he said, mock-serious, "We combine anatomy with algebra. How's that?"

Steve's eyebrow shot up. His lips pushed out in pure confusion. "I-what? That's… that's not even a thing."

Bucky laughed, nudging Steve's shoulder with playful insistence. "Don't make that face, pal. You're either in the mood or not. I know you are."

Steve shrugged slowly, face still betraying his distaste for whatever Bucky was cooking up in his slightly messed-up head. "Not sure if I am."

"Mhm," Bucky said, that stupid grin never fading. That damn ego always… "C'mon. All you gotta do is stick your little butt up and solve some algebra problems. The rest? I'll take care of."

Solve algebra issues while getting taken in doggy style from behind? Steve's jaw almost dropped.

"Solve algebra problems while… what? Seriously?"

Bucky leaned back, laughing again at the horrified look on Steve's

face. “Nobody on this planet had to do that before. Sounds like fun, no?”

Steve groaned, collapsing back against the bed. “To you, maybe. Because you’re a sadistic science genius, that’s why.”

“You up for it, Rogers?” Bucky asked, the grin still spreading across his face, smug as ever.

Steve threw a pillow at him, missing by a mile. “You’re insane.”

Bucky caught it with one hand, tossing it back with perfect aim. “Nah… I’m just efficient.”

Steve groaned again, face burrying in the pillow he just got thrown with at, half-mortified, half-resigned. Bucky’s confidence was so fucking annoying, infuriating. But, well, it was also kind of irresistible. Kind of…

Bucky shifted on the bed, smirking like he owned the whole world. “Alright, Stevie… we just need a little… preparation.” He reached toward the bedside table, digging through the drawer with no care at all. Papers rustled, a couple of old pencils clattered to the floor, and Steve flinched.

He rolled onto his side, curling slightly, and picked up the small, ragged teddy bear he’d had since he was seven. Its fur was matted, one button missing for the eye, replaced with a tiny stitch that had been clumsily sewn in years ago. He hugged it briefly, staring down at the worn fabric.

“I don’t know if I’m… ready,” he admitted softly, his voice barely above the hum of the spring afternoon outside coming in through the open window. He hesitated, remembering last time. The sharp pinch, the awkward panic, the way it had hurt.

Bucky glanced at him, still relaxed, leaning back against the headboard. “Hey. Relax,” he said gently, reaching into the drawer again and finally finding the tin of vaseline. He held it up with a crooked grin. “I promise, I’ll be careful. Use more than last time. Slow, steady… you tell me if it hurts, and we stop, no questions.”

Steve’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Even last time, I told you…” His hands fidgeted with the teddy bear, clutching it closer.

“I know, punk,” Bucky said softly, shifting closer without pressing him

against the cold wall behind his back. “I remember. And I’m not gonna mess it up this time. Scout’s honor.”

Steve gave a nervous laugh, brushing a strand of hair from his eyes. “Scout’s honor? Really? You’re quoting Boy Scouts now?”

Bucky just winked. “Hey, desperate times call for desperate measures.” He smeared a bit of the Vaseline on his finger to test how much it had melted in the drawer. “See? Easy, painless. You just… relax, okay? We go at your pace.”

Steve swallowed, staring down at the old bear in his hands. “I… I just don’t want it to hurt like last time.”

“You won’t feel a thing if you don’t want to,” Bucky said, his voice soft now, genuinely reassuring. “We stop if it hurts. I mean it. You call it, anytime. No embarrassment, no weirdness, just… me making sure you’re okay.”

Steve nodded, still holding the bear close. “Okay… maybe.” He gave a tiny sigh. “It’s just… last time, I thought I was ready, and I wasn’t. And then it… hurt.”

It wasn’t their first time back then. Steve had lost his virginity a while ago to Bucky. When they first began whatever this was, Bucky only knew intimacy the way he’d been taught it was supposed to work. With girls.

Bucky nudged him lightly with his shoulder. “You’re not a rubber doll, Stevie. You’ve got feelings, nerves, all that. I get it. That’s why this time? We take it even slower. Hell, if it takes extra five minutes or ten, I’ll wait. We do it right. You okay with that?”

Steve nodded again, glancing down at the bear one more time before setting it gently on the pillow beside him. “Okay… I trust you.”

Bucky grinned, the mischievous twinkle returning, but softer now, like he actually meant it. “Good. Then let’s make sure this goes a whole lot better than last time. Slow, steady, no surprises.” He gave Steve’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze before starting to guide things with that same confidence that Steve was unable to resist.

For the first time since the last try, Steve felt a flicker of calm under the nervousness, because Bucky was careful, funny, and awfully charming all at once, and he trusted him.

Bucky leaned closer, his fingers brushing Steve's suspenders. "Alright, punk… let's get you… comfortable." He tugged gently, undoing the buttons of Steve's shirt one by one. Steve flinched at first, but Bucky's warm smile and teasing tone kept him from panicking.

"There," Bucky said once the shirt hung open, revealing Steve's pale chest. "Much better. See? No big deal."

Steve shuffled slightly, tugging at the hem of his trousers. "Uh… maybe the suspenders too?"

"Sure thing, math genius," Bucky said with mock solemnity, helping Steve loosen the straps and letting the trousers fall a little, enough that Steve's hands went automatically to adjust himself while Bucky dropped the unbottened shirt on the floor. He laughed softly at the pink creeping up Steve's ears. "Relax, Stevie. It's just us. And… algebra."

Steve froze. "You weren't joking about the Algebra?"

"Oh, I don't joke around, pal," Bucky said, sitting back on his heels and quickly undoing the buttons of his own shirt before dropping the white fabric to the floor as well. "Here's the problem. If x equals the angle at which you're supposed to lift your butt to avoid a bad cramp, and y equals the coefficient of fun you're allowed to have, solve for z… where z is how much I get to kiss you after you figure it out."

Steve blinked, lips twitching. "What?"

Bucky grinned wider, leaning close enough that his nose brushed Steve's cheek. "C'mon, think it through. Math helps everything."

Steve groaned, but the absurdity broke through some of his tension. "You're actually messed up in the head," he muttered, but a laugh escaped anyway, light and awkward, and it made Bucky's grin stretch even further.

"That's my boy," Bucky whispered, leaning in to press a soft kiss to Steve's lips. Quick, warm, and teasing. Steve froze, then melted a little into it, the nervous tension loosening as Bucky's hands rested gently on his hips.

"Alright," Bucky said after pulling back just slightly, "Next step? Pants." He gave a playful shrug, motioning with his eyebrows like he was giving Steve an easy choice.

Steve nodded, hands fumbling as Bucky helped him guide the trousers down slowly, teasing with a light touch here and there. “Promise it… won’t hurt?” he asked quietly.

“I swear,” Bucky said again, grinning like a little brat, “And if anything hurts, you tell me.”

Steve shifted onto his knees slightly, uncertain, the pillow clutched to his chest. “Okay,” he whispered, voice tight but steady, his eyes flicking to Bucky’s with a mixture of nervousness and excitement.

“Good,” Bucky said softly, his hand brushing along Steve’s shoulder. “Now… butt up, we’re solving a serious… uh, math problem.” He nudged him gently, grin mischievous, but his touch surprisingly calming.

Steve groaned, rolling his eyes, but he did as instructed. Bucky’s hand helped him find the right position, gentle, steady. “There we go. Perfect.”

“Uh… Bucky?” Steve’s voice was small, hesitant, as he fumbled with the waistband of his boxers.

“Yeah, you gotta… let those go,” Bucky said quietly, voice low and comforting. He shifted his own pants off while giving Steve the space to move, sliding down beside him, bare legs brushing lightly against the sheets.

Steve pressed a small pillow under his belly, adjusting it so he felt more comfortable, eyes fixed on the old stuffed bear beside him. Bucky watched patiently, letting him take his time, thumb brushing lightly over Steve’s back when he looked unsure.

“You know,” Steve murmured, voice almost shy, “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to… all this.”

Bucky’s grin softened, eyes warm. “You mean the math? Or… me?” His tone was teasing, but gentle, giving Steve a chance to answer without pressure.

“Both,” Steve said honestly, a small laugh escaping before he could stop it.

Bucky rewarded it immediately with a light kiss to Steve’s cheek, the kind that made Steve’s heart skip. Not teasing, not rushed, just a little reward for letting himself laugh. “There,” Bucky said softly, thumb

stroking his jaw. “Every time you laugh, you get one. Don’t hold back, Stevie.”

Steve swallowed, biting his lip, still tense but a little lighter.

Bucky shifted on the bed, sliding down onto his knees like it was the most natural thing in the world. “Hold on,” he said, voice low but teasing, “we need the uh… optimal math position.”

Steve blinked, the side of his face pressing into the bed beneath him. “Math position?”

Bucky laughed, casual, leaning over to grab Steve’s angled legs and nudging them just right. “Yeah, I know how to achieve that. Trust me.”

Steve’s face burned, but he let Bucky adjust him anyway, hands clutching the pillow under his belly like it was a lifeline. “You really make this… look normal.”

Bucky snorted. “Normal? Nah. But comfy? Definitely.” He leaned closer, brushing a stray lock of Steve’s hair back as he grabbed the little tin of Vaseline from the bedside table. “Gonna make things slick so nothing’s uncomfortable.”

A small shiver ran through Steve’s scrawny frame as Bucky’s finger pushed the crack of his butt open, and his other pointing finger gently started to spread warmed-up bits of vaseline around his sensitive hole.

Steve snorted at the feeling, glancing down at the ragged teddy beside him. “How do you… know all this by the way? With the vaseline helping?”

Bucky raised an eyebrow, shrugging as he smeared a little more on his own fingers, his tone light as he made sure to get some vaseline into every little fold. “Instinct, mostly. And… months of observation, trial and error.” He laughed. “Not that I learned it in school or anything. Though that would’ve been nice in 1940, huh?”

Steve’s lips twitched. “Yeah, right. Nobody teaches this stuff. We were… we’re clueless.”

Bucky laughed softly, brushing his hands gently over Steve. “Exactly. But that’s the fun part. We figure it out together. Like always. Remember how we used to kiss behind the porch when we were kids?”

Steve's cheeks heated, a small laugh escaping. "Yeah… and-" a little hitch of his breath cut him off as Bucky stretched his hole with his finger carefully before pulling back out. "Uh, rub a little… but not-"

"Not like this," Bucky finished for him, nodding. "This is… advanced level." His grin was mischievous but careful. "Only fifth time, remember?"

Steve exhaled, a nervous laugh escaping as the bed shifted slightly beneath him. Bucky was rubbing… Persistent and generous, he rubbed his cock and smeared vaseline over his length. "Uh… Buck?"

"Hm?" Bucky said casually, still kneeling, his fingers steady.

"Why does it feel… like the bed's moving all by itself?" Steve asked, giggling nervously.

Bucky smirked. "That's just me helping things get… ready." He leaned close, brushing a kiss across Steve's butt. "Hey… say something dirty. For science."

Steve sputtered, half-laughing, half-panicking. "Dirty? I- uh… I don't-"

"Come on," Bucky coaxed, voice soft but teasing. "A word, a phrase… anything. I promise it'll help."

Steve bit his lip, then giggled. "Buck… you're a weirdo."

Bucky chuckled, pressing another kiss to the back of Steve's neck. "You're laughing. Reward time."

Steve let out another small laugh, shaking his head. "You really do make this… weirdly fun."

"Good," Bucky said, soft and steady now, still casual but careful with every movement. "Fun, gentle… just us figuring it out. Like always. You ready?"

Steve nodded, a little more relaxed now, holding the teddy bear loosely. "Okay… yeah, I think I'm ready."

Bucky smiled, leaning closer, hands steady, voice low and teasing. "Then let's see how much fun we can make this… together."

Bucky didn't give a warning for what came next. He just pressed his cock against Steve's hole, rubbing slowly. The sudden sensation made Steve gasp and buck forward instinctively, but Bucky caught him with

strong hands, steadying him before he could lose his balance.

"Relax," he whispered as he moved Steve, shifting his grip on his slender waist and positioning himself perfectly at Steve's entrance. "Big breath."

Steve did his best to relax, taking a deep breath and exhaling with a slight shudder before involuntarily shaking as Bucky continued to push deeper. Bucky tightened his grip on Steve's waist, his fingertips pressing firmly into the warm flesh.

Despite his desire to stay still, Steve couldn't help but make a small, needy sound. Breathing was even harder than normal with his asthma acting up, and he pushed the pillow away from his chest in a desperate attempt to get more air. His anxiety began to rise, and he started panicking, his breath coming in sharp intakes and gasps.

“More?” Bucky asked, choking on a breath as he waited for a reply. It was tight around his cock, tighter than he remembered it to be, but the slick glide of vaseline made each slow rock forward easier. He bobbed his waist slowly, trying to loosen Steve up gently. Every inch forward was measured, careful not to overwhelm Steve even as the urge to push deeper threatened to consume him.

"Y-yeah," Steve gasped into the mattress, fingers twisting in the sheets as his chest refused to widen enough to let his lungs fill up. The pillow beneath him felt suffocating, every choked inhale too tight, like his ribs were squeezing his lungs shut. He forced himself to unclench muscle by muscle despite the instinct to curl inward. Bucky wouldn’t push if it wasn’t okay. The thought grounded him just enough to keep from locking up entirely.

Bucky's blue eyes caught Steve's struggle with the pillow, immediately shifting closer to help him out. With gentle hands, Bucky pulled the offending cushion away, freeing Steve's chest and revealing the sharp lines of his ribs as he inhaled deeply.

The sudden rush of air into his lungs brought a wave of immediate relief. Steve's body reflexively relaxed, and he sank into the mattress beneath him, his breathing slowing, deeper now.

"Better?" Bucky asked, his voice soft and caring.

Steve gave a small, silent nod as he focused on steadying his breathing. Each inhale was more controlled now, less frantic. The tension inside him eased slowly, muscles relaxing until the snug

pressure around Bucky wasn't quite so suffocating anymore.

Bucky exhaled softly as the tension finally gave way around his cock, a shiver running through him when he pressed just a little deeper. His lips parted slightly, still flushed, still catching his breath, but his gaze never left Steve's face. Those sharp blue eyes traced every flicker of expression, every hitched inhale or bitten lip, searching for even the slightest hint that Steve might need him to stop. He really made sure that his best friend was okay, not hurting or trying to hide any discomfort.

"I'm gonna push and pull out now," Bucky said, his voice raspier with the effort of controlling himself. His hands tightened on Steve's hips as he studied the boy's face for any sign of distress. After a moment, satisfied that Steve was still okay, Bucky started to move. His grip on Steve's waist tightened just a fraction as he pulled out, eyes still on the back of his friend's head, watching for any reaction.

Steve's fingers clutched at the duvet, his head tilting back as he couldn't help but moan at the movement.

Then another moan as Bucky pushed back in, his dick swelling up more and more with every thrust.

Steve's body instinctively matched Bucky's rhythm, his muscles gradually relaxing as each deep thrust coaxed him open wider. A sharp exhale punched from his lungs every time Bucky pushed back in, his fingers twisting into the duvet until his knuckles turned white against the fabric.

"Y'okay?" Bucky murmured between breaths, his voice rough with the effort of keeping steady. His forehead was damp, his thighs burning from the movements.

"I'm-" Steve tried, but the sound broke as Bucky pulled out.

"It's-" Another push, another pause.

"Fine," Steve managed at last, his voice cracking but honest. The soreness was still there, faint at the edges, but it had faded into something else now. Something he couldn't name, somewhere between pressure and relief, burn and sweetness.

Bucky kept his rhythm careful but constant. Slow at first, then gradually quicker, steady as a heartbeat. In, out. A pause for breath. In again, easing deeper. He wasn't reckless this time, not like the other

nights when he sucked at Steve's cock till he filled his mouth with cum. He was patient, almost protective.

Steve lay there, face pressed into the pillow, not even bothering to think what he must look like. Pale face flushed, hair sticking to his damp forehead, back curved with effort. His ass up in the air, his hips decorated with marks of Bucky's fingertips pressing into his skin. He didn't care. The only thing that mattered was the way his body hummed, the way every movement sent a new spark through him.

His fingers reached for the small, battered teddy bear by his head, its stitched eye blurred in his vision as the bed groaned beneath them, each creak sounding like the frame might collapse under their weight at any moment. Steve's mouth hung open, drawing in breath after shaky breath.

God, it felt good. Not just the fire racing through him, but the ease of it. The way Bucky's hands steadied his hips, the way his voice softened every time he asked if Steve was okay. Steve had never felt so raw and safe all at once.

The thrusting went on for a while, pace picking up constantly. Time blurred. Steve was unsure how long they had been doing it already.

Thrust after thrust. Breath after breath.

"Fuck, I'm cuming," Bucky's voice broke into a low groan, his breath catching.

"Huh?" Steve hummed, dazed, twisting slightly as if to look back.

"Shhh…" Bucky muttered, his grip tightening instinctively around Steve's waist, knuckles whitening as he tried to hold on.

And then it hit him. His body tensed, pulling his cock out before collapsing, forehead nearly bumping Steve's ass. His hands slid down from Steve's waist to his thighs, fingers loosening with the release. He let out a long, unsteady exhale, chest heaving as the last waves of it left him.

Steve lowered his hips slowly onto the mattress, body trembling. He felt the warmth of Bucky's cum inside him, the strange mix of closeness and mess, and reached automatically for the napkins on the nightstand. It was the same pack they'd used earlier when eating pasta. With a quiet sigh, he dabbed at himself, careful and a little awkward, before tossing one over his shoulder toward Bucky.

Bucky caught it lazily, still flat on his back, staring at the ceiling with a dazed, satisfied grin softening his features.

“See?” he said at last, voice tired but full of warmth. “Told you it’d be worth it.”

—

Steve sat cross-legged on the bed, smoothing his hair back in place with quick, embarrassed motions. His cheeks were still pink, but the giggle in his throat betrayed that he wasn’t all that upset. Bucky sat on the floor at the foot of the bed, one knee bent, brushing invisible wrinkles from his boxers like nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“You’re a menace, y’know that?” Steve said finally, pointing at him with mock sternness.

Bucky looked up, smirking. “Yeah, but I’m your menace. Don’t pretend you didn’t enjoy it.”

Steve threw the balled-up end of a sock at him, laughing as it bounced off Bucky’s shoulder. “Shut up.”

For a moment, they both just sat there. The golden light of late afternoon entered through the small bedroom window, filling Steve’s notes and sketchbook with shadows.

Bucky stretched, then leaned back on his hands. “Alright, professor, we should get movin’ if we’re gonna make that dance tonight. Don’t wanna keep Peggy Carter waitin’, huh?”

Steve gave him a sharp look, but his blush deepened anyway. “Don’t start.”

“Relax,” Bucky said with a crooked grin. “You know I’m just messin’ with you.”

He reached for his satchel and tugged it closer, pulling out the neatly folded suit he’d stuffed in earlier that morning before school. The fabric looked a little worse for wear after being crammed in a bag all day, but Bucky shook it out, laid it across the chair by Steve’s desk, and started unbuttoning the shirt.

Steve, meanwhile, dug through his closet. At least in what little space there was of it, and pulled out his best shirt, a plain white button-

down, and the brown jacket his mom had ironed for him. The material wasn't new, but Sarah had kept it clean and pressed, and it looked decent enough for a dancehall.

"You're really gonna wear that tie, huh?" Bucky said as Steve laid it carefully on the bed.

Steve frowned. "Why wouldn't I?"

Bucky chuckled, tugging his own shirt on. "'Cause you can't tie a tie to save your life, Stevie. Don't worry, I got you."

Sure enough, a few minutes later, Steve stood in front of the cracked mirror attached to his door, fumbling with the knot, brows furrowed in concentration. The fabric refused to behave, twisting and sagging no matter how many times he tried.

Bucky stepped up behind him, taller frame filling the tiny space, and gently swatted Steve's hands away. "Here," he said softly. "Let me."

Steve froze as Bucky's fingers slid around his collar, the tie slipping through them. His reflection in the mirror looked almost too fragile, blond hair falling into his eyes, cheeks still faintly pink, lips parted as if he wanted to say something but didn't.

Bucky's gaze flicked up briefly, meeting Steve's eyes in the mirror, before he looked back down at the tie. "See, it's all about the fold, right? Over, under, loop. Like this. Simple." His voice was casual, but his hands lingered longer than they had to, brushing against Steve's chest as he tightened the knot neatly under his chin.

Steve swallowed, heart pounding, but managed a faint smile. "Show-off."

Bucky grinned, tugging the tie snug. "Looks good on you. Real sharp. The girls won't know what hit 'em."

Steve rolled his eyes, though his lips twitched upward anyway. "I'm not tryin' to impress girls."

"Yeah, sure you're not," Bucky teased, stepping back.

They swapped spots then, Steve fussing with his jacket while Bucky dropped onto the floor, pulling out a small rag and tin of polish from his bag. He picked up Steve's scuffed shoes and set to work, rubbing in firm, practiced circles.

Steve blinked, surprised. “You don’t have to do that.”

Bucky shrugged without looking up. “Can’t have you lookin’ like you dragged yourself there through a war zone. Besides, my ma would kill me if I let you walk into a dance with dirty shoes. Gotta make a good impression.”

Steve sat back on the bed, watching him work, the steady rhythm of cloth against leather, the fold of concentration in Bucky’s brow. Something about it, about Bucky taking the time, about how natural it seemed, made Steve’s chest swell in affection.

“Thanks,” Steve said quietly.

Bucky glanced up, smiled crookedly. “Don’t mention it. Just don’t step in a puddle on the way, alright?”

By the time Bucky was finished, both boys looked as ready as they could. Steve, in his shirt and jacket, tie neat at his throat, shoes polished to a shine. Bucky, taller and lean, wore his suit like he’d been born for it, hair combed back in a way that almost tamed its mess.

For a moment, they both stood in the cramped bedroom, grinning like fools, the air between them charged with something unspoken.

“Alright,” Bucky finally said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s go knock Brooklyn flat.”

—

The bus drove down Brooklyn’s evening streets, every lamppost throwing streaks of yellow light through the windows. Steve sat by the window, hands tucked into the pockets of his jacket, watching buildings blur by. Beside him, Bucky leaned against the seat back, one arm slung casually along the top rail, humming along with the jazz coming from the driver’s radio up front.

“You nervous?” Bucky asked, nudging Steve with his knee.

“About what?”

“The dancin’, the crowd, the whole thing. Me dragging you to the hall despite rule number something.” Bucky grinned, leaning closer. “C’mon, don’t tell me this is just another Friday for you.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “I’ll survive. Just don’t step on my feet.”

Bucky laughed, tossing his head back, earning a look from the old man sitting a few seats up. Steve hid a smile, shaking his head as the bus came to a halt.

By the time they stepped off, the street was busy. The dancehall was ahead, newly reopened, its front glowing with golden bulbs strung above the wide entrance. Couples streamed in, women in pretty dresses, men in suits smoking as they waited for friends to catch up. The music already leaked out through the doors. Bright trumpets, rolling drums, a bassline that made the pavement vibrate.

Their friends were gathered by the steps. Joey, Richie, Charlie, and Mickey, all done up in whatever their closet had offered.

“There you are!” Joey clapped Bucky on the back. “Thought you two were gonna ditch us for your fancy study session.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Bucky shot back with a grin, pushing Steve toward the entrance.

Inside, the air was thick with cigarette smoke and perfume, the ceilings high and painted dark red. A live band was set up on stage, brass gleaming under the lights. The floorboards hummed with the shifting weight of dancers already in action.

They made it past the security man at the door, each muttering some variation of “Brooklyn College, sir.” Nobody asked questions. Nobody asked for IDs. Just a nod and a wave, and suddenly they were in.

At the bar, things split quickly. Richie slapped a couple of coins on the counter and ordered shots for the boys. The bartender didn’t blink, just poured out lines of liquid into small glasses.

“To Friday!” Richie declared, raising his glass.

“To Friday!” the boys echoed, clinking glasses before tossing the liquor back.

Steve hung back, arms crossed, while Peggy Carter stood just beside him, also without a glass. She gave him a little smile, her British accent soft as she said, “Looks like we’re the odd ones out.”

Steve chuckled, shoulders loosening slightly. “Guess so. Not exactly my thing.”

“Mine neither,” she admitted, leaning an elbow against the bar. “Don’t

tell, though. They all think I'm mysterious when I refuse."

Steve smiled wider than he meant to, but before he could reply, the music swelled, and the crowd began moving toward the dance floor.

"Alright, let's go!" Joey cheered, dragging Mickey along.

The others followed, and Steve found himself pulled into the crowd of people, Bucky's hand firm on his shoulder, guiding him through. The wooden floor vibrated beneath their feet as they reached the edge of the crowd.

Then…

"Bucky!"

Evie Novak again. All dolled up, in a dark blue dress and hair pinned up. She appeared at his side, touched his sleeve lightly, and tilted her head up at him. "Dance with me?"

Someone hand her the award for "most annoying girl who will never accept rejection" already.

Bucky hesitated. For a split second, Steve thought he'd give in. Old habits and all. But then Bucky smirked and jerked his chin toward Richie.

"Richie's a better dancer than me. Take him."

Richie, mid-laugh with Joey, blinked in surprise. "Hey? What?"

Evie's smile vanished. Her blue eyes narrowed, lips parting in disbelief. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me," Bucky said smoothly, still grinning. "He's got the moves. Go ask him."

Evie huffed, crossing her arms, then spun on her heel. As she passed Steve, she leaned close enough for only him to hear.

"He's an asshole. But I'll find out what girl's makin' him act like some holy choirboy," she snapped, before walking off into the crowd. "And I swear to God if it's fucking Dot…"

Steve burst out laughing, clapping a hand over his mouth.

Bucky turned toward him with a raised brow. "What's so funny?"

Steve shook his head, still chuckling. “She told me she will find the girl making you act like a holy choirboy.”

Bucky smirked, but before he could reply anything sassy back, Joey had already grabbed his arm and dragged him deeper into the crowd. “C’mon, Barnes! Don’t stand there lookin’ pretty. Dance!”

Bucky let himself get pulled in, laughing as he stumbled into the rhythm. He caught Steve’s eye across the floor and motioned him over, exaggeratedly swaying his hips until Steve rolled his eyes and reluctantly stepped forward.

“C’mon, Stevie,” Bucky called, reaching out a hand. “Just follow my lead.”

The music pounded, horns blaring, drums rattling. The crowd moved in time, skirts twirling, shoes stomping. Steve, stiff at first, let Bucky spin him once, then twice, before the laughter bubbled up and he actually started to move with it.

For the first time that night, the weight of school and rules and everything else lifted. The boys laughed, bumping shoulders, Bucky pulling him into the beat until even Steve’s clumsy steps looked like dancing.

The air was hot and loud, the whole room pulsing with energy.

“Steve?”

He turned. Peggy Carter stood just beside him, her dark curls pinned neatly, her navy dress catching the light. She looked directly at him, a soft smile curving her lips.

“Would you like to dance?” she asked, offering her hand.

Steve’s breath caught.

He stared at Peggy’s outstretched hand for a second too long, blinking like maybe he hadn’t heard her right over the swell of trumpets. He wiped his palm nervously against his trousers before finally taking her hand.

“Uh, sure,” he muttered, voice half-swallowed by the music.

Peggy’s smile warmed instantly, and she guided him a few steps into the shifting crowd. Her fingers, light but steady, settled into his as she

placed his other hand gently against her waist. Steve's breath hitched, his heart beating faster than the bass drum did on the stage.

The band continued with a quicker swing, and Peggy moved with practiced ease, her skirt twirling as she stepped neatly in time. Steve, on the other hand, immediately messed up. His left foot caught his right, his body jolted awkwardly, and he nearly bumped into the couple dancing beside them.

"Sorry," he blurted, cheeks burning red hot.

Peggy only laughed softly. "Don't apologize. Just follow me."

"I'm no good at this," Steve mumbled, eyes glued to his feet as if concentration could keep them from tangling.

"That's alright," she said, steadying him with a gentle tug at his hand. "You don't have to be good. You just have to try."

Steve risked a glance up at her. She was glowing in the golden shine of the dancehall lights, her dark hair pinned neatly, her red lips curved into a smile that somehow wasn't mocking, only kind. She was close enough for him to notice the faint smell of rosewater clinging to her dress.

And then his heel scraped against hers.

"Sorry!" he hissed again, embarrassed.

Peggy chuckled, shaking her head. "If you keep apologizing, I'll think you rather like stepping on me."

That startled a laugh out of Steve. He ducked his head, grinning sheepishly, trying again to match her steps. She slowed her pace, helping him into the rhythm. Bit by bit, he began to find it. Still not perfect, still clumsy, but steadier.

"There," she murmured encouragingly. "See? You've got it."

"Barely," Steve said under his breath, though his lips twitched with the hint of a smile.

They swayed and turned, Peggy's confidence guiding his awkward frame. Her hand was firm in his, her voice soft when she leaned close enough to be heard over the horns. "You surprise me, Steve Rogers. Most boys don't have the courage to admit when they're bad at

something."

Steve flushed, glancing down again as his shoe brushed hers. "Maybe I should've sat this one out."

"And miss dancing with me?" she teased, arching a brow. "That would've been a shame."

He looked up, really looked this time, and her gaze caught his, steady and bright. For the first time all night, he forgot about the heat in his cheeks and the knots in his stomach. He just followed her lead, listening to the music.

For one fleeting moment, it didn't matter that he was small, or clumsy, or the butt of every joke in gym class. Peggy Carter smiled at him like he belonged right here.

—

The horns climbed higher, the drumsticks clattered against the snare, and Peggy twirled gracefully under Steve's arm. He nearly lost his balance in the spin, but she steadied him with a sure hand on his shoulder, laughing as if he'd meant to stumble like that.

"You're catching on faster than you think," she teased.

Steve huffed, trying not to stare at her lips when she smiled. "I'm just trying not to crush your toes. That's about as far as I've gotten."

"Lucky for me," Peggy said smoothly, leaning closer so he could hear, "I wear strong shoes."

Steve laughed softly, shaking his head. He still couldn't quite believe she'd asked him, of all people, awkward, scrawny Steve Rogers, to dance. And not only that, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

The song shifted into another upbeat swing number, the kind that had most couples around them hopping and spinning like their shoes were on fire. Peggy didn't demand that kind of energy from him. She adjusted to his pace, slower, simpler, but always in time with the beat.

"So," she asked between steps, tilting her head, "do you like it here? Brooklyn?"

Steve blinked at the question, nearly missing the next beat. "Uh… it's home. Always has been."

“I can see that,” Peggy said thoughtfully. “I’m starting to like it more and more every day, honestly. It’s loud and stubborn. Not all polished like London.”

Steve gave a crooked little grin. “Loud and stubborn, huh? Guess I fit right in.”

She laughed, a warm sound that settled into his chest. “I’d say so. Though you don’t strike me as loud.”

“Stubborn, then,” Steve admitted, almost sheepishly.

“Oh, very,” she replied without hesitation, and he wasn’t sure if she was teasing or serious.

They danced a while longer, Peggy guiding him with subtle tugs and gentle pressure on his hand and shoulder. Steve found himself loosening up. Not good, not elegant, but no longer stiff as a board. He even risked a small twirl of her this time, grinning when she landed back into place without a hitch.

“See? Natural,” Peggy said approvingly.

“Natural disaster, maybe,” Steve muttered, though he was smiling.

She tilted her chin at him, eyes gleaming. “Don’t sell yourself short, Steve Rogers.”

He swallowed, nodding slightly, his throat too tight for much of a reply.

The song soon ended, applause rippling through the crowd. Steve was breathless, not from the dancing so much as from the strange swell in his chest.

“Want to go again?” Peggy asked lightly.

Steve glanced toward the bar, feeling the sweat prickling at his collar. “Maybe… maybe I should sit one out. Catch my breath.”

Peggy nodded, smiling as if she’d expected it. “Of course.”

She released his hand, and together they made their way through the dancing crowd, back toward the edge where the boys had claimed a cluster of tables earlier. The air was cooler there, though still buzzing with laughter, clinking glasses, and the scrape of chairs against the wooden floor.

Steve scanned the group automatically, expecting to see Bucky's dark hair bobbing somewhere among them. Instead, he found Joey and Richie slouched together on one bench, a brown bottle of beer being passed clumsily between them. Both were flushed, their voices too loud and too slurred to match the music anymore.

"Hey," Steve said, approaching them. "Where's Buck?"

Joey squinted up at him, blinking hard as if focusing took effort. "Bucky?" He burped a laugh and waved his hand lazily. "Left. Him and Mickey."

"Yeah," Richie slurred, smacking Joey's shoulder like it was the funniest thing in the world. "Said somethin' about… about- hell, I dunno. Left, though. Few minutes ago."

Steve frowned, his chest tightening in a way the dancing hadn't managed. He glanced back toward the dancefloor, then the bar, but there was no sign of Bucky.

Peggy touched his arm gently. "Everything alright?"

Steve forced a small smile, though his stomach churned. "Yeah. Just thought he'd still be here."

Steve lowered himself onto one of the empty chairs, still catching his breath. Peggy sat opposite, crossing her ankles neatly under her chair. She leaned forward slightly, resting her chin against her hand, studying him.

"You and Barnes," she began casually, "you seem awfully close."

Steve blinked, caught off guard. "We… yeah, I mean, we grew up together. Just kids in the same kindergarten, y'know?" He rubbed the back of his neck, chewing at his lip.

"How long?" she pressed, curious but not prying.

Steve's eyes flicked toward the crowd, scanning. No dark hair bobbing, no tall figure weaving through the couples. He swallowed. "Forever, I guess. Don't remember not havin' him around."

Peggy smiled. "That explains it. You move like you've always known what the other's thinking."

Steve tried to chuckle, but it came out strained. His heel tapped

against the wooden floor, restless, his eyes darting toward the bar, the doors, anywhere he might catch sight of Bucky. The feeling in his chest wasn't jealousy. Not exactly. It was that guilt. He completely forgot about Bucky when he danced with Peggy. Completely forgot about the stupid list they'd made, the promises whispered in Bucky's bedroom. They didn't feel like enough right now.

Peggy tilted her head. "You've been scanning the room since we sat down. You're worried about him."

Steve shifted restlessly. "Nah, just- just keepin' an eye out. He's… he's got a way of getting into trouble sometimes, that's all." It was a half-truth, but not the real reason.

Her brow arched, skeptical but kind. "James Barnes can handle himself, I'd assume. He's got that look about him."

Steve gave her a thin smile, still restless. He pressed a hand over his knee to stop the bouncing, but it didn't help ease the tightness in his chest.

Peggy leaned back, folding her hands in her lap. "If you're so worried, shall we go find him?"

Steve's head snapped up, relief flashing across his face. "You'd do that?"

"Of course," she said simply, standing and smoothing her skirt. "Can't have you sitting here like a cat on hot bricks all night."

Steve got to his feet quickly, grabbing his jacket from the back of the chair. They weaved through the crowd again, first to the hallway leading to the restrooms. The tiled floors echoed with laughter and muffled conversations, but neither the men's room nor the ladies' room showed any sign of Bucky or Mickey.

Peggy leaned against the wall outside the doors, arms crossed. "Not here."

Steve sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "Maybe… maybe outside?"

So they made their way to the entrance, where two men in uniform coats stood by the doors. The night air hit Steve's sweaty forehead and made him shiver slightly.

He stepped forward hesitantly. “Uh, excuse me. Did you see two fellas leave a few minutes ago? One tall, dark hair, suit jacket kinda loose. Other guy’s taller, dark hair too, sharp-looking?”

“Man, come on. More details. You just described every guy on the street.”

“I dunno- uh, beige pants, overgrown hair. The other one’s like actually huge, real broad shoulders… navy pants?”

The two men exchanged a look. One of them shrugged before speaking. “Yeah, actually. Might’ve seen a pair like that. Left maybe twenty minutes ago, headed east down the block.”

“Were they drunk?” Steve asked quickly.

The guard shook his head. “Not stumbling, no. Looked fine. Chuckling talking. Didn’t seem like trouble.”

Steve pressed his lips together, nodding. “Thanks.”

As they stepped back into the night air outside the hall, Peggy glanced at him. “See? They’re alright.”

But Steve’s jaw was tight, his eyes fixed down the block where the guard had pointed. Bucky wasn’t supposed to just disappear like that. Not without telling him. Not after everything.

Chapter 10: Chapter 10

Sunday, April 30th, 1940 - 52 days left

The Sunday air was warm, the kind of late-spring morning where even Brooklyn's brick and asphalt smelled faintly of blooming things. Steve walked the familiar two blocks with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, his stomach tight the whole way. He hadn't slept much the two nights before, kept waiting for the phone to ring. It hadn't. He'd even swallowed his pride and dialed the Barnes house once, sitting hunched by the pale yellow wall phone in his kitchen. No answer.

And so, Sunday morning, here he was, standing at the white-painted fence that wrapped around the Barnes' property. The paint was bright and crisp. Rebecca had once joked that their father made them repaint it every spring, whether it needed it or not. Outside it, the driveway gleamed with two cars parked side by side, polished to a shine. Steve's worn shoes crunched over the walkway lined with tulips and roses, the blossoms arranged neatly, almost too perfectly, in the front garden.

He climbed the porch steps, each one painted the same clean white as the fence, and rang the brass bell by the door.

A shuffle of footsteps from within, and then the door cracked open. Valeria Barnes appeared, apron tied around her waist, a dusting of flour across the front of it. Her dark hair was curled loosely, her blue eyes tired but soft. She smiled when she saw him, though it didn't reach all the way into her gaze.

"Steve," she greeted warmly.

"Morning, Mrs. Barnes," Steve said politely, fiddling with his hands. "Is, uh, Bucky home?"

Normally, she would've stepped aside, tilted her head toward the staircase, and called up in her sharp, affectionate voice. *James! Steve is here!* But today she only folded her hands over her apron.

"James will not be free to spend the day with you," she said carefully, as though she'd practiced the line. "He needs to… find his way back to God. To remember the path his father and I set for him."

Steve blinked. The words sat heavy, strange, almost rehearsed. "Back

to God?" he echoed slowly.

Valeria gave a little nod, already turning half away from him. "Yes. It is what is best. But-" she glanced back, her smile brightening like she hadn't just said something that made Steve's chest tighten, "You and your mother, you must have something sweet. I have just baked carrot cake. Let me pack you some."

She rushed off before Steve could say anything more, leaving the door open slightly.

Steve stood there awkwardly, staring at the open space of the doorway. From where he stood, he could see the tidy hallway inside. The shoe shelf, the row of coats hanging neatly from hooks, the polished staircase that wound up to the second floor. At the top of those stairs was Bucky's room. Steve stared up, listening hard.

Nothing. No radio, no footsteps, no voice calling down. Just the tick of a hallway clock and the faint clatter of dishes from the kitchen.

He swallowed, jaw tightening, then sighed through his nose and dropped his gaze back to the porch boards. His hands itched to walk in, run up those stairs, and knock on Bucky's door until he answered. But it was Valeria's house, her rules, and Steve Rogers had been raised to be respectful.

So he waited, fingers twisting nervously. After a minute or so, Valeria returned, holding a small Tupperware tin with a slice of cake inside.

"Here," she said, pressing it into his hands. "For you and your mother. Tell her I say hello, yes?"

Steve forced a small smile. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

The door began to close gently, leaving him standing there with the box of cake, the smell of sugar and cinnamon clinging to the air.

Steve glanced one last time toward the staircase, then stepped back down the porch.

The tupperware tin felt heavier than it should as Steve carried it against his side, his other hand buried deep in his pocket. The morning had warmed into noon, but all Steve could feel was the cold knot in his stomach.

Find his way back to God.

The words replayed in his head, sharper each time. Mrs. Barnes' smile had been too neat, too practiced. She hadn't even called upstairs for Bucky. That was the strangest part of all, because in all the years Steve had known Bucky, Valeria always called him down when Steve came by.

His feet navigated the sidewalk, leading him back past the white fence, the bright tulips, the shiny cars. The whole Barnes house had always felt like another world compared to his own cramped little apartment. Clean, orderly, but sometimes suffocating, if he was honest.

Steve hugged the tin closer and chewed his lip. Something about Valeria's words stirred up an old memory he hadn't thought about in years.

He and Bucky had been eight, playing on the streets in front of Bucky's house after school. Bucky had been quieter that day, his dark hair falling into his eyes as he half-heartedly kicked the ball. Steve had asked him what was wrong, and Bucky admitted in a mumble that he'd forgotten his English homework again. Third time that month. Their teacher had written another note for his parents.

"Ma's gonna kill me," Bucky had muttered, kicking at the ball.

Steve had tried to cheer him up, puffing his chest out the way he did when he wanted to look braver than he felt. "Hey, it'll be fine. You're smart. She knows that. My ma never yells like that. She just talks it through."

But Bucky hadn't looked convinced. He'd just shrugged and kicked at nothing, his small shoulders stiff.

Later, when Steve had to run home for his better shoes, his lungs wheezing too hard from the game, he'd promised he'd be right back. But when he returned to the Barnes' house, the ball lay abandoned in the grass. No sign of Bucky.

Steve had knocked, worried, and Valeria herself had opened the door. He'd asked shyly if Bucky could come back out.

"James needs to remember discipline," she'd said firmly, her Romanian accent sharper in those days. "He must learn the right path. You will see him tomorrow."

And that had been that. The door shut, and Steve had waddled home

alone, the image of Bucky's pale, unhappy face sticking with him long after.

Now, walking the Brooklyn streets almost a decade later, the words sounded too similar.

Find his way back to God.

The same cryptic firmness, the same don't ask questions tone. Only this time, they weren't eight anymore. They were seventeen. And something about last night, something Bucky had done, had landed him right back in that invisible cage of rules and punishments.

Steve's chest ached. He hated the thought of Bucky being trapped in that house, shut off from him. And the guilt bit sharper. Had it been because of the dancehall? Because Steve had danced with Peggy? Or was it something else entirely?

Either way, he didn't like it. Not one bit.

He adjusted his grip on the tin and quickened his steps. The Rogers apartment was just a block away now, the thought of his mom's kind eyes the only comfort against the storm of questions spinning in his head.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> This chapter includes implied and referenced child abuse, mentions of past violence, and descriptions of bruising. Also, there is a scene of corporal punishment at school, including a teacher (she is evil af).
>
> Disclaimer: Bucky's relationship with his parents is deeply unhealthy and harmful. Like many victims, he doesn't always recognize abuse for what it is, and his understanding of violence is shaped by both long-term trauma and the time period in which this story is set... The school corporal punishment scene is fairly descriptive. If that makes you uncomfortable, feel free to skip everything after the third --- until the section ends at the next --- <3

Monday, May 1st, 1940 - 51 days left

The air was sharp that morning, a thin chill sneaking under Steve's collar as he rounded the corner. The Barnes' white fence came into view, the familiar car already waiting in the driveway. Steve slowed when he saw the silhouette in the backseat.

Usually, he was the one waiting. Usually, Bucky leaned against the car door or tossed pebbles across the street until Steve arrived. But this time? James Buchanan Barnes sat small in the corner of the backseat, head ducked, shoulders folded in.

Valeria stood by the open driver's door, her pressed blouse a pale cream tucked neatly into a burgundy skirt, hair pinned into a knot at the back of her head. She looked like she had stepped out of one of those magazines Steve sometimes spotted in corner stores. The flour-dusted apron from yesterday was gone, replaced by the sharp smell of perfume and hairspray.

"Steve!" she greeted. Her smile stretched wide, as if nothing at all were out of place. "Good morning. How was the cake? Carrot, with cinnamon. The recipe was from Good Housekeeping," she added proudly, as though the magazine itself had blessed her kitchen.

Steve forced a smile and nodded. "It was… great. My ma loved it. Thank you, Mrs. Barnes."

Valeria's face softened even more at that. "I am glad. You must take some whenever you stop by. James never appreciates the things I bake." She clicked her tongue, then reached to open the back door for Steve. The gesture was oddly formal, almost as though she were escorting him into a carriage.

Steve ducked his head, murmured thanks, and slid into the seat. The air inside the car felt tight, heavy. Rebecca sat up front, dark braids bouncing as she turned toward him with an immediate grin before averting her gaze back to her mother. "Mama! Did you hear what Jenny Harker did yesterday at recess? She-"

But Steve barely heard her. His eyes had already fixed on Bucky.

He sat stiff against the door, his satchel hugged to his lap, fingers picking restlessly at the strap. He hadn't said a word when Steve got in. No smart remark, no easy grin. Nothing. Not even a hi. His head was angled toward the window, jaw clenched.

And that's when Steve saw it.

A blotch of purple, faint yellow at the edges, sitting high across Bucky's cheekbone. Subtle enough that a stranger might've assumed that he just accidentally hit his cheek somewhere. But Steve wasn't a stranger. He had seen Bucky with bruises before. He'd memorized every line of that face years ago, and the bruise stood out immediately.

"Buck," Steve whispered before he could stop himself. His hand lifted automatically, fingers brushing Bucky's chin to guide his face toward him.

Bucky flinched. Swatted Steve's hand away, hard enough to sting. His jaw flexed, eyes flicking down, refusing to meet Steve's. The quick motion made the bruise stand out even more.

Steve's heart twisted. His fingers curled into his lap.

The car shifted into motion, Valeria humming along with the radio. Rebecca gossiped about Jenny Harker, whoever that was, and some boy who'd dropped his tray in the cafeteria yesterday. The world outside looked the same. Brick houses, laundry lines swaying in the breeze, but inside the car, the silence between Steve and Bucky screamed louder than anything.

Steve sat angled toward him, gaze fixed, his chest aching with worry.

Every few seconds, Bucky's fingers twitched against the strap of his bag, a restless little habit Steve had only ever seen when his friend was hiding something.

But Bucky never looked up. Not once.

—

The tires of Valeria's car hissed over the street as she pulled into the curb, the engine settling into a quiet hum. Steve didn't wait for her to say another word, only offering a brief, polite, "Thanks, Mrs. Barnes," before slipping out of the backseat.

Bucky trailed beside him, shoulders hunched, his gaze fixed on the cracked pavement between his shoes. Steve's hand shot out, gripping Bucky's arm firmly but gently, guiding him away from the familiar circle of boys gathering at their usual spot. The chatter of Richie and Joey and the rest of the gang sounded faintly in the distance, but Steve wasn't interested in anyone else.

Rebecca's sharp eyes caught them as they left their usual path, a quick frown forming before she shrugged and disappeared toward her friends.

Steve's chest tightened. He pulled Bucky a few steps farther, into the quieter space near the fence lining the schoolyard, away from prying ears.

"Buck, what the hell happened?" His voice was low but urgent. "I came by Sunday. I waited for you to call. I called the house, and nothing. Your mom… she said… she said you needed to find your way back to God. What did that even mean?"

Bucky's jaw flexed. He didn't meet Steve's eyes. "It… means nothing. Mom's just… being Mom."

"Nothing?" Steve's voice sharpened despite himself. He crouched slightly to catch Bucky's gaze, even as the taller boy slouched back, hands shoved into pockets. "She said that to me, Buck. On Sunday! And… look at you." He pointed at the faint purpling of Bucky's cheek. "What is that? You have to tell me."

Bucky flinched, twisting his head away, running a hand through his hair. "I don't know where that came from. Stop asking. It's nothing."

Steve's stomach knotted tighter. "Nothing? You think this is nothing?

A bruise on your face is nothing?" He pressed, leaning a little closer. "Did your dad- did he do this?"

Bucky's hands flexed into fists at his sides. "No! God, Steve. It's just stress. Home stress. Bad morning. I don't even know why you were at my house on Sunday. I wasn't expecting you. It wasn't a thing, okay?"

Steve's chest tightened. "Not a thing? That you are hurting and hiding it? That you-" he stopped himself. He remembered the one time he'd been at the Barnes' house as a kid. Rebecca had sobbed as their father yelled at her downstairs, sharp and terrifying, one of those moments Steve had frozen in place. That same father, the one who had fought in World War I and had office authority now, could easily terrify Bucky still to this day.

He stepped closer, trying to soften, but not giving up. "Buck, I know you left with Mickey after the dance hall. What happened? Why didn't you tell me?"

Bucky's eyes flicked toward him, cornered. "I just… I went to get a drink with him. Nothing else. That's all. The drinks at the hall were too expensive, so we… went somewhere else."

Steve's heart sank immediately. The lie hung thick in the air. His mind raced. *Too expensive? Bullshit.*

"You're lying," Steve said softly, but firmly. "You know it, I know it. This isn't just about drinks. Was it about me dancing with Peggy?"

Bucky's jaw tensed, and for a moment Steve saw him shrink in place, shoulders curling inward. "Stop," Bucky muttered, almost a whisper. His lips trembled. "Stop asking. Just… drop it. You wouldn't get it anyway."

Steve's hands dropped slowly, but only to clutch them together. He studied the blue eyes, so familiar yet guarded, the subtle tremble of his soft lips. "I'm not trying to get you in trouble," he said carefully. "I just… I care. I care about you. I need to know you're okay. That's all."

Bucky blinked, lips pressing into a thin line. The muscles in his face loosened slightly, but only enough to betray that he was fighting tears. "I… I just had some stress at home. That's it. Nothing more. I don't… I got home pretty drunk after the bar, and my parents got mad. And the bruise, really, I don't know. Maybe from the sidewalk. Maybe I bumped into a door. Stop poking at it."

Steve exhaled sharply, his worry shifting into helpless frustration. He had known Bucky's parents were strict, knew the boy's old man had a temper, the mother was obsessed with rules beneath her warmth, but this was new. This was different. The quiet fear behind Bucky's attempt at casual dismissal.

"You don't have to tell me everything," Steve said softly, lowering his voice, trying not to overwhelm him. "I just need you to… talk to me a little. Just a little. I hate seeing you like this, and I can't… I can't pretend it's nothing when you're clearly-"

Bucky's hands curled into fists, and suddenly, he looked small and fragile. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes, but he didn't let them fall. "I said! I don't want to talk about it! It's just… too much. Too much. Can you just… drop it?"

Steve's chest ached watching him, knowing that stubbornness and fear were walls that had been built over years, over rules and punishments, and his father's shadow. But he couldn't stop pressing. Not yet. "Buck, please. I just… I need to know you're okay. I'm not mad. I just…"

Bucky's voice broke then, small, hoarse. "I said it's fine. I'll… I'll be fine. Stop."

Steve exhaled, a trembling, frustrated sound. He wanted to argue, to keep pressing, but the tears flowing down Bucky's cheek stopped him. He softened, lowering his hands slowly.

"Okay," he said finally, voice quiet. "Okay, Buck. I'll stop. But… promise me you'll tell me if something's really wrong, alright?"

Bucky didn't meet his eyes, only muttered, "Yeah. Yeah, I promise."

The moment hung, heavy and tense, before Bucky broke the silence.

"C'mon, the bell is about to ring."

—

Bucky didn't even glance toward the usual table outside in the yard. Instead, he tugged Steve by the sleeve toward a quieter corner of the cafeteria, where the whirr of conversation was softer, and the bright fluorescent lights didn't feel as overwhelming.

"C'mon," he muttered, voice low. "Let's sit here today."

Steve hesitated. “Are you sure? The guys… they’ll notice.”

Bucky shrugged, dropping his lunchbag onto the table. “I don’t feel like answering questions.” His eyes flicked down, and for a moment Steve thought he saw a flicker of something, something heavier than usual, behind the blue gaze.

Steve slid in beside him, careful not to come too close. “Questions about what?” he asked softly, his tone tentative, gentle.

Bucky’s jaw tightened, letting out a short breath. “Just… don’t feel like talking.”

Steve nodded slowly, letting it go. He knew when to push and when to just be there, and today clearly called for the latter.

Bucky opened his lunch, eyes distant, and pushed his sandwich across the table. “Here… you can have it. Not hungry.”

Steve blinked, startled. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, a small shrug. “Just… not feeling it today.”

Steve picked it up, tearing off a corner of bread as he watched Bucky poke absent-mindedly at the apple slices his mom had packed into a small Tupperware. “Want some of these?” he asked gently as he popped one into his mouth.

Steve took one, chewing slowly, letting the quiet stretch between them.

He kept his voice soft, careful not to press too hard. “You don’t wanna sit with the others… because of the bruise?” he asked, tiptoeing around the subject, eyes flicking to Bucky’s cheek.

Bucky’s hand paused mid-bite, the skin around his jaw tightening slightly. He didn’t answer, just shook his head faintly. “Nah… don’t feel like explaining stuff today. You don’t gotta worry about it.”

Steve nodded, choosing to let it go. He shifted a little closer, giving Bucky the space he seemed to need but not leaving him alone. “Alright,” he said softly. “We’ll just… sit here. Eat. Chill.”

Bucky’s lips twitched into a small, almost invisible smile. “Thanks, Stevie.”

“You always get my vote for lunch company,” Steve murmured, trying for lightness, taking a bite of the sandwich.

A faint laugh escaped Bucky, quiet, but real. “Guess you’re full of surprises today,” he said, voice low.

Steve grinned, careful and gentle. “Just trying to keep up with you. Someone’s gotta.”

For a while, they ate in silence, sharing small bites and sips of milk, letting the rest of the cafeteria fade away. Steve kept a careful eye on Bucky, how his hand trembled slightly when he reached for something, how his eyes darted around, how the bruise looked faintly blue in the fluorescent light. He didn’t ask again. He didn’t press.

—

The bell rang, and the boys shuffled off toward their next class. Religious Education.

Steve hated the way Bucky stiffened the moment they stepped into that classroom. The stern woman at the front, Mrs. Clark, silver hair twisted into a tight bun, thick-rimmed glasses balanced on the tip of her nose, had never hidden the fact that she disliked James Buchanan Barnes. Not because he was late, or loud, or even disruptive, though he sometimes was. No, it was because of where his mother came from.

“Romanian,” she’d once muttered under her breath when Bucky revealed the information. As if the word itself carried dirt. Steve had heard it, and he’d never forgotten.

The boys slid into their usual spot, back row, close enough to avoid her sharpest eye but not so far she’d think they were hiding. They folded their hands, heads bowed as Mrs. Clark led the morning prayer, her voice sharp and precise.

“Our Father, who art in heaven…”

Bucky’s lips moved lazily, not really keeping up. Steve, watching from the corner of his eye, whispered just softly enough for Bucky to catch the rhythm, nudging him back into the flow. Bucky smirked faintly when he caught on.

After prayer, they slumped down into their seats, Steve nudging his friend’s arm.
“You look like you’re about to pass out.”

Bucky rubbed at his temple with a half-snort. “Could’ve used one more hour of sleep. Or three. Think she’d notice if I did math homework in here instead?”

Steve chuckled under his breath. “She’d notice if you breathed too loud.”

The mood between them softened, a faint thread of normalcy weaving in as Mrs. Clark began her lecture about scripture and virtue. The room was silent. Every movement or cough seemed awfully loud in the silence.

And then a pencil fell to the floor.

Bucky turned instinctively, glancing back to see a girl a row behind them leaning down awkwardly, her cheeks pink as she reached to pick it up. Without thinking, he reached down and grabbed it first, turning to her with that easy grin of his.

“Here-”

The sharp snap of a ruler striking the desk made the entire room jump.

“James Barnes.” Mrs. Clark shouted. “What do you think you are doing?”

Bucky blinked, handing the pencil to the girl. “I was just-”

“Talking out of turn. Disrupting the lesson. Encouraging distraction.” Her voice rose as she marched forward, ruler already clutched in her hand.

Bucky sat up straighter, brow furrowed. “I was helping. She dropped-”

“Do not backtalk me!” The ruler smacked against her palm as she towered over his desk. The classroom was dead silent. “Stand up. Now.”

Steve’s stomach twisted as Bucky rose, jaw tight.

“You will not pretend to be virtuous when your actions are plainly disobedient,” Mrs. Clark continued, eyes narrowing at him like he’d spat in church. “You think kindness excuses arrogance? That misbehavior can be cloaked with good intentions? That may fly in your mother’s household, but not in mine.”

Steve clenched his fists under the desk. His mother's household? That was meant to be an offense, he knew it.

"I wasn't being arrogant," Bucky muttered, his voice raspy. "Just wanted to be kind."

The ruler cracked across his knuckles before the sentence even finished. Bucky hissed through his teeth, pulling his hand back instinctively.

"Hold them out."

For a moment, Steve thought, hoped, Bucky would refuse. His chest rose and fell, eyes dark. But then, with a sharp exhale, he extended his hands. The ruler smacked once, twice, sharp red lumps forming across his skin.

"Apologize," Mrs. Clark demanded.

Bucky swallowed, eyes dropping. "Sorry."

"Louder."

His voice cracked as he forced it out. "Sorry."

The ruler snapped against the desk one more time for emphasis before she finally turned to walk back to the board and continue her lecture. "You will write a reflection, Mr. Barnes. Two pages. On modesty and obedience. Due Monday."

And then, almost as if she'd been waiting for the chance, her voice dipped colder. "And perhaps, while you're at it, you can reflect on the company you keep, and why a young man of your… background… might be prone to such lapses." Her gaze flicked openly to the bruise on his cheek, lingering cruelly.

The silence in the room turned heavier, suffocating.

Bucky lowered himself back into his seat, knuckles raw and cheeks burning with humiliation.

Steve sat stiff beside him, hands clenched in his lap, forcing himself to breathe evenly. Every ounce of him wanted to drag Bucky out of there. But instead, he sat and waited.

—

The hallway was alive with chatter, shoes clicking against the floors, books being stuffed into satchels, and the noise of lockers banging shut. Steve and Bucky got out of the religion classroom and into the current of students.

Steve was the first to speak, his voice low but heated, his words rolling fast like he'd been holding them in since the ruler hit the desk.

"She's a damn tyrant. Did you hear her? Acting like helping somebody is a crime? And dragging your family into it? Who does that?" He shook his head, pale hair falling into his eyes as he walked. "She doesn't even teach about faith. Just how to humiliate kids."

Beside him, Bucky kept his hands shoved into his pockets, shoulders loose in a way that looked practiced. Like he'd learned long ago to let insults and bruises slide right off him. His face, though, still carried a quiet tension.

"Don't let it get under your skin, Stevie," Bucky muttered, his voice almost casual. "I've had worse."

Steve frowned, glancing at him sideways. "Worse? That witch with a ruler can't-"

"No." Bucky cut him off as he slowed just enough for the crowd to drift past them. "I mean, worse at home."

Steve stopped dead in his tracks. His satchel slipped down his shoulder as he turned, staring at Bucky like he hadn't heard right.

Bucky slowed, too, finally meeting his gaze. His blue eyes were dull, but something flickered deep in them. He lifted a hand halfway to his cheek, then dropped it again. "You wanted to know about the bruise? You were right. It's from my old man."

The words hit Steve like a stone to the chest. He'd suspected… God, he had, but hearing it said out loud made his stomach twist.

"Bucky…" His voice was low, strained. "He- he really hit you?"

Bucky shrugged, a humorless smile tugging at his mouth. "More like a fight. I came home drunk, Mickey dropped me off extra late 'cause I didn't want Ma to see. But Pa was waiting. He wasn't thrilled to find out his son spends Saturday night sneaking home smelling like whiskey. One thing led to another."

Steve swallowed hard, his throat tight. “Are there more?”

“What?”

“Bruises.” His voice cracked, softer now. “On your arms, your- anywhere else?”

Bucky rolled his shoulders, exhaled through his nose, and instead of answering, asked quietly, “Can I come with you today? To your place? Don’t feel like going home yet.”

Steve’s heart pounded against his ribs. He stepped closer, lowering his voice as the masses of students pushed on around them. “Of course. You don’t even have to ask.”

Bucky nodded once, quick, like it embarrassed him to say it. His fingers twitched at his sides, then disappeared back into his pockets. He leaned against the wall, smirk half-formed again as if to lighten the weight of his own words. “What, you’re not gonna make me sign another contract of rules first?”

Steve rolled his eyes but smiled, more gently this time. “Nah. This one’s just common sense.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Steve bumped his shoulder softly against Bucky’s arm. “You’re always welcome with me, Buck. Always.”

For a moment, Bucky just looked at him, his usual easy charm stripped away. Then he sighed, his shoulders dropping as if he’d been carrying something too heavy. “Thanks, Stevie.”

—

The Rogers apartment smelled faintly of laundry soap and cheap coffee from the morning, but soon enough it was overtaken by the sharp sizzle of sausages frying in a pan. The kitchen was small, barely enough space for two people to stand side by side at the stove, but to Bucky, it might as well have been a palace compared to how his own home felt lately.

He sat slouched at the little wooden table, one knee pulled up, pencil scratching over the lined pages of his notebook. The four chairs didn’t match. One was painted green, one wobbled on uneven legs, but they felt lived-in, familiar, like everything in this place.

From the stove, Steve muttered under his breath, trying to keep the sausages from sticking. “Next time we’re making pasta again. I know pasta.”

Bucky smirked without looking up. “Nah, this is real cooking, Stevie. Potatoes, meat, this’ll put hair on your chest.”

Steve glanced over his shoulder, rolling his eyes. “I’m not the one who worries about chest hair.”

“Hey.” Bucky tapped the eraser of his pencil on the notebook, faking offense. “Low blow.” But the corner of his mouth twitched as he bent back over his work, tongue poking out in concentration.

The open window above the sink let in the hum of the city, the squeaking brakes of a bus at the stop down the block, a hammer banging somewhere at the half-finished apartment complex a street over, the chatter of kids skipping rope in the alley. It mixed with the sizzling of oil in the pan and the bubbling pot of potatoes.

Steve leaned over the pan like it might betray him any second and turn the sausages into charcoal pieces, then peeked over at Bucky. His friend was hunched close to the paper, trying his best to keep his handwriting neat, the pencil lines dark and sure. The sight made Steve smile.

“You’ve been at that for ages,” he said, flipping a sausage with more hope than skill. “How long’s it gotta be?”

“Page and a half already,” Bucky muttered, blowing on the page to scatter the eraser crumbs. “Figured the old witch might finally shut up if I hand her more than she asked for. And if it don’t look like a chicken scrawled it.”

Steve grinned, shaking his head. “You’re overdoing it.”

“Better over than under.” Bucky didn’t look up this time, just scribbled another line. “Last thing I need is her going off again, not with these.” He flexed his fingers carefully, though his knuckles already looked normal. “Still sting a little when I hold the pencil too tight.”

Steve bit back a sharp response. Instead, Steve forced a soft smile and poked at the sausages again. “Well, if your hand cramps up, I’ll finish it for you. Write it all in cursive so fancy she’ll have to frame it.”

That finally dragged Bucky’s eyes up. He leaned back in the chair, lips

curling into something easy. “Maybe you can add a nice drawing to it.”

Steve laughed, warm and quiet, cheeks flushing a little as he reached for a spoon to stir the potatoes.

Bucky watched him for a moment longer, the way his friend’s thin shoulders moved under his shirt as he worked, the way he frowned like cooking was a punishment. Then he looked back down at the page, pencil scratching steadily, the corner of his mouth soft now.

Safe. That’s what this kitchen was. Safe enough that his chest didn’t feel so heavy anymore. Safe enough that he could write about “misbehavior” in tidy little sentences and not feel like it defined him. Safe because Steve was here, fussing over sausages in a pan too small, humming under his breath like he didn’t even notice he was doing it.

Soon, the pencil stilled. Bucky leaned back in the mismatched chair with a groan, arms stretching over his head until his joints cracked. “That’s it,” he declared, letting the pencil fall to the table with a clatter. “Brain’s empty. If she don’t like a page and a half, she can eat it.”

Steve turned from the stove, eyebrows raised. “Page and a half is good, but…” He wiped his hands on a rag, wandering over to peer at the notebook. “You added the part where you’re supposed to reflect on how you’ll do better in the future?”

Bucky gave him a look like he’d just asked him to sew lace curtains. “Do better in the future? I already wrote about bein’ kind to others, not distracting the class, takin’ responsibility. What else am I supposed to say?”

Steve smirked, twirling the spatula between his fingers. “That you’ll… pray more often, uh, listen to instructions more closely, sit still.”

Bucky groaned, dragging a hand down his face. “Sit still? You try sittin’ still when she babbles on about Abraham for forty minutes. My legs fall asleep.”

“Write it anyway,” Steve teased. “You want her to stop glaring at you, don’t you?”

Bucky shot him a side-eye, but eventually leaned forward again, muttering under his breath as he scribbled. *I will try to sit still during lectures.*

Steve laughed. “There. That wasn’t so hard.”

Bucky dropped the pencil again, flopping back in his chair. “Yeah, yeah. You’re a regular little angel.”

The potatoes boiled behind Steve, the sausages crisping in the pan, the tiny kitchen filling with steam. Steve gave the pot a stir, then glanced over his shoulder with a grin. “Alright. Once you’re done with your holy promises, we should hit algebra. Test’s Wednesday, remember?”

Bucky groaned louder than before, slouching dramatically. “Yeah, yeah, Wednesday. We’ll actually study this time, promise.”

Steve arched a brow, smirking. “Really? Because last time we were supposed to study, we ended up-” He cut himself off, cheeks coloring.

Bucky smirked, leaning forward on his elbows. “Making out on your bed, you mean?”

Steve’s ears turned pink, but he didn’t deny it. “Exactly.”

Bucky chuckled, shaking his head. “Not this time. I ain’t in the mood for that today anyway.” His grin widened mischievously. “Besides, I’d scare you if you saw the mess my old man left on me. Bruises all over. Upper body looks like I got abused.”

He meant it as a joke, but the second the word left his mouth, he saw Steve’s smile vanish. The blond froze at the stove, spatula half-raised, staring at him. “What?”

Bucky waved a hand dismissively. “Relax, Stevie. Just kiddin’.”

But Steve’s face had gone pale, his voice sharp. “No, you weren’t.” He turned fully now, abandoning the stove, the sausages hissing behind him. “So you’ve got more?”

Bucky shifted in his chair, suddenly very interested in the notebook in front of him. “It’s nothin’. Don’t fuss.”

“Don’t fuss?” Steve’s voice cracked, and he was at the table in a heartbeat, leaning down, eyes narrowing. “Where? Show me.”

Bucky’s hands fidgeted with the edge of the notebook, his gaze darting everywhere but Steve. “C’mon, you’ll burn the food.” He nodded toward the stove, trying to sound casual. “Flip the sausages, will ya? They look done already.”

Steve hurried over, grabbed the pan handle, and yanked it off the burner, dropping it onto the cold part of the stove with a bang. He switched off the gas with a snap, then turned back, eyes blazing. “There. Not burnin’ now. So, show me.”

Bucky shrank a little in his chair, though his smirk tried to stay in place. “You’re gettin’ bossy, Rogers.”

But Steve wasn’t smiling. He reached across the table, fingers brushing Bucky’s wrist. “Buck. Please. Let me see.” His voice softened, but there was steel under it. “I’m not lettin’ this go.”

Bucky swallowed, staring down at the scrawled reflection on the paper. His hand curled into a fist. “It’s just a few marks, alright? You don’t gotta-”

Steve cut him off, his voice firm. “You think I don’t care? That bruise on your face is bad enough. And now you’re tellin’ me there’s more.” He exhaled, shaky, pinching the bridge of his nose. “When my ma gets home, she can look at you proper. She’s a nurse, she’ll-”

“No.” Bucky’s reply was sharp. “No, Steve. I don’t want your ma pokin’ at me. I don’t-”

“Why not?” Steve demanded, anger and worry mixing together. “She can help. She won’t tell anyone, you know she won’t.”

Bucky shook his head hard, jaw tight. “Because it’s bad enough, you know. I don’t need her seein’ me like that too.” His voice cracked at the end, but he forced a laugh, weak and unconvincing. “Besides, I’m fine. I can handle it.”

Steve stared at him, chest tight, fists trembling at his sides. He wanted to argue more, to shake him until he admitted everything, but the look on Bucky’s face stopped him. With a long sigh, Steve turned back to the stove, fishing the sausages out of the oil with a fork, lining them on a chipped plate. His voice was quieter now, but no less firm. “You don’t have to handle it alone, Buck. Not with me here.”

Bucky’s eyes dropped again, fingers tracing the edge of the notebook. For once, he didn’t have a smart reply.

Chapter 12

Tuesday, May 2nd, 1940 - 50 days left

Steve's room looked like a war zone of scattered papers and half-finished equations. Practice sheets were spread across the bed, pencil smudges staining the pages, and Steve's handwriting growing messier the more frustrated he got.

"X equals… seven?" Steve mumbled, scratching the back of his neck as he studied his notes.

Bucky leaned in, shoulder brushing his. He tapped the page with the eraser end of his pencil. "Almost. You messed up that step, so you're missing the minus down there."

Steve groaned, collapsing back onto the bed. "I'm never gonna pass tomorrow."

Bucky smirked, lying back beside him. "That's what you said about chemistry last month, and who passed with a solid B?"

Steve gave him a sidelong look. "Because you drilled me till my head hurt."

"Exactly. So trust me," Bucky grinned, poking him in the ribs, "you'll pass."

They might've gone back to arguing about fractions and signs, but Sarah Rogers' voice came from down the hall, calling them to the kitchen.

The boys got up and padded down the narrow hall. Sarah stood at the counter in her soft blue housedress, sleeves rolled above her elbows. The smell of cabbage and onion filled the little kitchen. Humble food, the kind that filled their bellies, the kind that a single mother and nurse on a tight budget could make work. She was stirring a pot, her blonde hair pinned back loosely. Soft lines of tiredness were around her eyes, but that gentle smile was always there anyway.

"Wash up, both of you," she said warmly, glancing over her shoulder. Then she added, "Bucky, you'll stay for dinner, won't you?"

Bucky froze mid-step, rubbing his hands on his pants. "Uh… I don't know if I should, ma'am. My mom'll be cookin' at home and she-"

Sarah waved a hand, dismissing his hesitation. “It’ll be fine. You boys have been studying for hours. You need a good meal. Just call your mother on the telephone and let her know, so she won’t worry.”

Bucky shifted on his feet, embarrassed. “I don’t wanna run up your bill.”

“It’s a local call, sweetheart,” Sarah assured with a little chuckle. “Go on.”

Steve was already pulling out plates from the cabinet, setting them down on the small wooden table with practiced ease. “Go on, Buck. She won’t bite.”

Eventually, Bucky stepped to the wall phone, the heavy receiver cool in his hand as he dialed home. It rang twice before someone picked up.

“Hello?” came Becca’s sharp little voice.

Bucky sighed. “It’s me.”

“Bucky,” she huffed, not even trying to hide her annoyance. “You’re never home anymore! It’s not fair. You get to run off to Rogers’ and leave me here with all the bad moods and the yelling.”

“Becca-”

“And ma’s already mad. Says you skipped dinner yesterday and the day before, and now she don’t even know if she should bother cooking for you anymore.”

Bucky pinched the bridge of his nose, lowering his voice, glancing back to make sure Steve and Sarah were distracted with plates and silverware. “Just put mama on the phone, Becca. Please.”

Becca huffed again, muttering something under her breath before he could hear her put the receiver down and walk away.

Behind Bucky, Steve was laughing quietly with his mother, asking about her day. She was telling him about a patient she’d seen at the hospital, her voice warm, casual, like it was the most natural thing in the world to share. Bucky’s chest tightened a little as he listened, envy curling in his stomach. The ease. The safety. He couldn’t remember the last time he spoke to his own mother without measuring half his words.

Finally, Valeria's voice came on the line. Stern. Sharp. "James."

"Hi, Ma." Bucky tried to keep his tone light, careful. "I'm at Steve's, we've been studyin'. Ms. Rogers invited me to stay for dinner, so I thought-"

"You thought?" Her voice cut him off. "You thought you could run off again and leave me to wonder where you are? To cook for nothing?"

Bucky swallowed hard, lowering his voice even more, turning his back to the kitchen. "I'm sorry, Mama. I should've called sooner."

"You've been avoiding home," she snapped, no softness in her tone. "Avoiding your family. Do you think I don't see it? Do you think God doesn't see it? James, this behavior… it isn't right."

Bucky pressed his forehead against the wall, fingers tight on the receiver. "I ain't avoidin' you, Ma. I just… we've got that algebra exam tomorrow, and Steve needs-"

"I don't care about Steve Rogers' exam!" Valeria's voice rose, then softened into something colder. "You can stay there tonight if that's what you want. Sleep under their roof. But don't expect me to keep waiting on you like this. Not when you forget your place in this family."

His throat closed. He could feel Steve's presence across the room, could imagine those blue eyes glancing over at him with that worried softness. He couldn't let him hear this. Couldn't let Ms. Rogers hear it either. So he just pressed the phone tighter to his ear. "I'm sorry, Ma. I'll do better."

Silence stretched, heavy and suffocating. Finally, she said, curtly, "Then maybe find your way back to God while you're at it," and hung up.

Bucky stood there for a moment, receiver pressed to his ear, listening to the hollow dial tone. Only when Steve's voice floated over. "Buck? Everything alright?"

Bucky let the phone receiver fall back into place with a soft clack. He lingered a moment with his back to the kitchen, taking a slow breath, pushing down the ache in his chest before he turned. "Yeah, sure."

Steve was already sitting at the little table, mismatched plates laid out, spoon tapping lightly against the edge as he looked up

expectantly. His mom was scooping steaming cabbage stew into bowls, humming a random tune under her breath.

“You staying?” Steve asked, tilting his head.

Bucky cleared his throat, forcing his voice steady. “Yeah. Uh… Ma wasn’t too thrilled, but I figured maybe it’s best I stay outta the way tonight.”

Sarah looked up from the stove, her brows rising. She walked over, setting a bowl down in front of him before filling his glass with water. “Not too thrilled? What’s that mean, Bucky?”

He glanced down at the table, rubbing the back of his neck. “Just-” he hesitated, then went with the safest thing he could manage. “Just caused some trouble. Stress at home. You know how it is.”

Sarah pulled out a chair and sat with them, folding her hands neatly before her. Her blue eyes, darker than Steve’s, studied him. “Your mother… she’s always been kind to us. Sending food, treating Steve like her own. She doesn’t strike me as the sort to be angry with you without reason. You want to tell me what happened?”

Bucky’s throat tightened. He dropped his gaze to the table, picking up his spoon and stirring his stew slowly. “Nothin’ worth worryin’ about. I got carried away Saturday night, came home late, my folks weren’t too pleased. That’s all.”

Sarah’s eyes lingered on him. Not harsh, but sharp in the way only a nurse could be. The kind of nurse who noticed every bruise, every cough, every limp. He knew she’d seen it. The purple blotch still blooming along his cheek. But she didn’t push. She only reached over, squeezed his hand lightly, and said, “We all make mistakes, sweetheart. What matters is learnin’ from them.”

“Y-yes, ma’am,” Bucky mumbled, relief flooding him as she let it go.

With that, they all started to eat. The stew was humble. Cabbage, potato, bits of leftover sausage cut into small pieces. Steve spooned from his bowl like it was a feast. Bucky took slower bites, savoring the taste, and couldn’t help but grin.

“This is real good, Ms. Rogers,” he said between spoonfuls. “Better than anything I’ve had all week.”

Sarah chuckled softly. “Flattery won’t get you seconds, Bucky, but I

appreciate it."

"It's not flattery if it's true," Bucky shot back, earning a laugh from Steve, who nearly choked on his bread.

They talked casually as they ate. Steve asked his mom about the bills, and Sarah asked how the studying was going. When Steve groaned about algebra, Bucky promised again that he'd help him pass, and Sarah only shook her head with a smile.

As they were finishing, Bucky cleared his throat, setting his spoon down carefully. "Uh, Ms. Rogers? If it ain't too much trouble… would it be alright if I stayed the night?"

Sarah's response was instant, like she'd been waiting for him to ask. "Of course it's alright. We'll take the couch cushions and make you up a bed in Stevie's room."

Bucky blinked, almost startled by how quickly she said it. "I don't wanna be a bother-"

"You're no bother." Sarah stood, already gathering plates. "Steve can lend you some clothes for the night, and I'll wash yours now. They'll be dry by morning, good as new. You'll go to school fresh, nobody'll know the difference."

Bucky's chest swelled with something that was both gratitude and shame, all tangled together. He stood as well, trying to take the dishes from her hands, but she swatted him away gently.

"Sit, Bucky," she said with that soft finality only mothers had. "You're our guest."

Bucky sat. He glanced sideways at Steve, who was grinning ear to ear, clearly pleased with the whole arrangement. And for the first time in days, Bucky felt the tight knot in his chest loosen just a little. He couldn't deny that he was oddly glad about not having to go home just yet.

—

The bathroom door creaked when Bucky pushed it open, the smell of soap trailing faintly out into the hall. He ran one hand through his combed hair, the other tugging absently at the loose waistband of Steve's spare pajama pants. They were soft from years of wear but baggy enough that he had to keep pulling them up, and the undershirt

Steve had lent him clung tight across his shoulders. It felt almost like the fabric might split if he stretched too far, but he didn't care.

Steve's room glowed faintly down the hall. When Bucky stepped inside, he stopped in the doorway for a moment. Steve was crouched low, dragging the couch cushions across the wooden floor to form a chunky bed beside his own. His mother was bent neatly over, tucking a crisp sheet into place, smoothing the corners with quick, practiced motions. She had already set out a blanket and a pillow, a white pillowcase smelling faintly of sun and lavender detergent.

"You need a hand with that?" Bucky asked, voice soft.

Steve waved him off, puffing as he shoved one last cushion into place. "Got it. You just stand there lookin' ridiculous in my clothes."

Sarah chuckled, glancing up at him. "He's fine, sweetheart. Sit down and let us finish."

Bucky obeyed, taking a seat on the edge of Steve's bed. His hand drifted to his shoulder almost automatically, rubbing at the dull ache of a bruise that was now exposed without sleeves hiding it. He hadn't realized the motion until Sarah's sharp eyes caught it. She straightened, brushing her palms together.

"Does something hurt?" she asked, tilting her head toward him.

Bucky shook his head quickly, mustering a polite half-smile. "No, ma'am. Just sore. It's nothin'."

Her expression lingered for a moment, something knowing, something he couldn't quite hide from. Then she softened, patted Steve's shoulder, and stepped toward the door.

"Well. You boys get some sleep. No whispering until all hours, understood?"

"Yes, Ma," Steve replied automatically, a grin tugging at his lips.

Bucky's throat felt tight again. He managed a small, "Thanks, Ms. Rogers," as she leaned down and pressed a kiss to Steve's forehead. Then, to his surprise, she reached over and cupped Bucky's cheek lightly, thumb brushing just above the bruise.

"Good night, darling," she said simply, with the same tenderness she'd given Steve.

Bucky froze, cheeks warm, before he murmured another thank you. Then she slipped out, closing the door behind her. A moment later, the TV hummed through the thin wall.

The boys were alone.

Steve reached for the lamp on his nightstand, clicking it on so the room fell into a soft orange glow, then flicked off the ceiling light. Bucky slid down onto the cushions, folding his arms behind his head. He stared up at the low ceiling while Steve climbed into his own bed above. For a while, the only sound was the faint whir of cars outside and the TV muffled through the wall.

“You alright?” Steve asked finally, his voice low, like it wasn’t meant to disrupt the coziness of the moment.

“Guess so. Just… kinda embarrassed, y’know?”

Steve leaned on one elbow, peering down at him. “Embarrassed about what?”

“Your mom.” Bucky turned his face to the side, jaw tensing. “She probably figured it out. The bruises. Where they came from.”

Steve didn’t answer right away. His hand twitched against the edge of his blanket like he wanted to reach down but didn’t. “She ain’t the type to judge you for that, Buck.”

Bucky pressed his lips together, exhaling through his nose. “Doesn’t matter. Feels like I brought all that mess into your house. Like I can’t even keep it hidden good enough.”

Steve’s chest ached from hearing it, but he didn’t push. He let the silence stretch before asking softly, “What’d your ma say? On the phone.”

Bucky groaned, covering his face with one hand. “Mad. Real mad. Becca said she was sour all day. Then, when I finally got her on the line, she- she told me I might as well stay here if I like it so much. Like… like she didn’t care if I came back.”

Steve sat up straighter. “That’s not true.”

Bucky’s voice cracked faintly. “Felt true. She sounded tired of me. Like she already gave up.”

Steve leaned over the side of his bed now, so their faces were closer. His voice was firm, sure. “She hasn’t given up. She’s just-” He stopped himself, frowning. He wanted to say angry, strict, unfair. But he knew those words wouldn’t help. “She’s just not good at sayin’ things the way my ma does. Doesn’t mean she doesn’t care.”

Bucky swallowed hard, eyes shining faintly in the lamplight. He nodded like he believed it, though Steve knew he didn’t.

“Thanks for lettin’ me stay,” Bucky mumbled after a long pause.

“You never gotta thank me for that,” Steve said quickly. “You know my ma’ll always make space for you. And so will I.”

The TV in the next room still buzzed low, and outside, a car horn honked. The boys settled again, Steve lying on his side to watch Bucky until his eyes grew heavy. Bucky fiddled with the blanket corner, thinking about the bruise on his shoulder, his father’s voice, his mother’s disappointment.

Steve’s eyes were already closed when he heard Bucky shift below, the rustle of blanket against cushion. He kept quiet, hoping maybe his friend would relax and follow him into sleep, but then came that soft whisper.

“Stevie?”

Steve hummed, too drowsy to form a word.

“…Think we can… uh, cuddle?”

That pulled him awake a little more. He blinked, turned his head down over the edge of the bed. Bucky’s face was tilted up toward him, shadows hiding half his expression, but Steve could see the nervous bite of his lip.

Steve’s mouth curved slowly into a grin. “Course we can.”

He rolled over, scooting against the wall, and lifted the thin blanket in silent invitation. The mattress dipped as Bucky climbed up carefully, like he was afraid of breaking the old frame. The bed was narrow, meant for one skinny boy, not two nearly-grown young men, so they bumped knees and elbows, laughing under their breath as they tried to fit.

“Don’t kick me outta my own bed,” Steve whispered, voice teasing.

Bucky snorted quietly. “You’re the one with the sharp elbows. Gotta come with a warning label.”

The nightstand lamp bathed them in gold until Bucky reached up and flicked it off. Darkness closed in, only the faint glow of Brooklyn’s streetlamps spilling through the thin curtain.

Outside, a distant car horn honked again, some neighbor shouted down the block, and the world kept moving. Inside, it was just the two of them, hidden in warmth.

They lay on their sides facing one another at first, breathing slowly, eyes adjusting to the dark. Steve’s nose wrinkled when Bucky’s hair tickled his cheek. He was about to laugh when Bucky whispered again.

“Your ma- she won’t, uh… come in at night, will she?” His voice was small, cautious. “Check on us?”

Steve chuckled, muffling it into his pillow. “What are you, twelve? No, Buck. She doesn’t just wander in. Haven’t you noticed she trusts us?”

Bucky let out a shaky breath that sounded almost like a laugh. “Yeah. Just… y’know. My ma- she’d…” He trailed off, shoulders stiff.

Steve reached across the little space between them and set his hand lightly on Bucky’s arm. “You’re safe here,” he whispered. “She won’t bother us.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. Then Bucky slid closer, pressing carefully into Steve’s chest, resting his forehead against the curve of his shoulder. Steve adjusted without hesitation, draping an arm around him and tucking the blanket tighter around them both.

“Better?” Steve asked softly.

“Yeah,” Bucky murmured. His voice was already heavier now, like sleep was creeping up on him. “Lots better.”

Bucky shifted one last time, nuzzling into the crook of Steve’s neck. Steve smiled in the dark, eyelids heavy, his hand still resting against Bucky’s back.

The old apartment creaked now, and then, the city hummed beyond the window, but the boys didn’t notice. In that narrow bed, squeezed shoulder to shoulder, they finally drifted off. Safe, warm, and close.

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> I'm not sure if this chapter really needs a warning, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. There are multiple references to Bucky's toxic home life, including two scenes that highlight it. Abuse is being justified, and Bucky's fear of his father is very present.

Wednesday, May 3rd, 1940 - 49 days left

The library smelled like paper and dust, the sort of dry air that clung to the back of your throat when you stayed too long. Morning sunlight filtered in through tall, grimy windows, landing in stripes across rows of wooden tables. A silence hovered over the room, broken only by the rustle of turned pages, the scratch of pencils, and the occasional sigh of a frustrated student.

At the back, near a shelf stacked with battered atlases, Steve and Bucky shared a table with Mickey and Joey. Books and practice sheets were spread in chaotic piles. Joey hunched over his notebook, chewing on the end of his pencil like it might spit out the answers if he bit hard enough.

"X equals negative two," Bucky said, tapping Joey's paper with the butt of his own pencil. "Not three. You dropped the parentheses here."

"Aw, hell." Joey scrubbed the pencil over the numbers and fixed it, muttering under his breath. "Why's math gotta be all rules anyway? Feels like the teacher's just makin' it up."

Mickey laughed softly, flipping through his book. "Everything's rules, man. Math just tells you straight to your face instead of sneakin' around."

Steve shook his head with a tired grin, leaning closer to Bucky. "What about this one?" He pushed his practice sheet forward, covered in eraser smudges. "Feels like I been lookin' at it for an hour."

Bucky glanced down, hair falling over his forehead as he bent toward the page. He tapped the equation. "Nah, look. You gotta move the constant first, then divide. Watch." He scribbled the steps in clean, confident handwriting, explaining under his breath until Steve's frown softened into understanding.

“Oh.” Steve’s eyes lit faintly, like his brain unlocked the ability to make sense of math suddenly. “That’s… not so bad. Kinda makes sense now.”

“Told ya.” Bucky leaned back in his chair, smirking just a little. “You’ll pass today.”

Steve chuckled, shaking his head, but the way his gaze lingered on Bucky held something softer than amusement.

That was when the familiar clipped voice drifted over them.

“Mind if I join?”

The three boys looked up to see Peggy Carter standing beside their table, a neat stack of books in her arms. Her hair was pinned perfectly, blouse tucked into a skirt that fell against her knees. She carried herself like she didn’t need permission, though she’d asked for it anyway.

“Dot’s tied up tryin’ to explain something to Evie,” Peggy said dryly, rolling her eyes. “But Evie’s more interested in fussing with her lipstick than learning how to solve a quadratic. I was about to lose my mind.”

Mickey grinned and gestured to the empty chair. “Pull up a seat, Carter. The more brains we got, the better chance we stand.”

Peggy sat, smoothing her skirt as she placed her books down. She leaned in, scanning the mess of equations across their papers. “What are you working on?”

“Practice sheets,” Steve muttered, lifting his own page. “Tryin’ not to drown before the exam.”

Peggy smiled at him, then looked down at the question. She pointed neatly. “That’s not so bad. You just-”

Joey groaned. “You kiddin’ me? You’re a secret algebra pro as well?”

“It isn’t hard to understand,” Peggy replied, though there was no bite in her voice, just matter-of-factness. “You only have to treat both sides the same. Balance it. Like weights on a scale.”

Bucky chuckled low. “Guess you’re smarter than the rest of us, huh, Carter?”

Peggy shrugged lightly. “Hardly. I just pay attention.”

For a few minutes, the air around their table was… *nice*. She helped Joey make sense of a fraction, and Steve scribbled with new confidence. Even Bucky leaned back, arms folded, watching the group settle into a steady rhythm.

Then Peggy tilted her head, eyes landing on Bucky’s face. Her brow furrowed.

“Barnes,” she said softly, “what happened to your cheek?”

The question dropped like a pin in the silence. Steve’s pencil froze. Mickey glanced sideways, his smile fading.

Bucky’s jaw tensed. He gave a short laugh, dismissive. “This? Nothin’. Got clipped in PE.”

Peggy frowned. “We haven’t had PE yet this week.”

Something flickered across Bucky’s face. Likely irritation, the kind that sparked quickly. His easy posture stiffened, and he looked down at the table. “Right. I mean- I, uh, hit it at home. Closet door.” He forced another chuckle, hollow as paper. “Happens.”

Peggy’s lips pressed together. “That’s not true.” Her voice wasn’t cruel, just firm. “You’re lying.”

Bucky’s head snapped up, eyes darkening. “Why the hell’s it matter to you?” His voice came out sharper than intended, too loud for the library’s hush. A couple of heads turned their way.

Steve leaned in quickly. “Buck-”

But Bucky wasn’t done. “You don’t know me, Carter. Don’t go pokin’ your nose where it don’t belong.”

Peggy blinked at him, startled by the bite. But her chin lifted all the same. “I only asked because I was concerned. There’s no need to bark at me.”

Steve jumped in before it escalated further, his hand landing gently on Bucky’s arm. “Alright, alright. C’mon. Let’s not. She meant well.” His voice was calm, low, meant to cool his best friend’s temper.

For a second, Bucky just stared at him, betrayal flashing across his features. Steve had sided with her. Not fully, but enough. Enough that

Bucky's jaw tightened, that his knee started bouncing under the table again.

Peggy exhaled slowly, straightening her books. The silence stretched awkwardly, broken only by Joey's muttered curse at another problem.

Bucky leaned back in his chair, arms crossing over his chest. His cheek ached where the bruise burned under her gaze, but worse was the feeling in his gut. The mix of shame, jealousy, and raw temper he couldn't shake. Peggy's sharp eyes. Steve's soft defense of her. Everyone looking at him like they were trying to figure him out.

He hated it.

—

The hallway was crowded, their nervous classmates heading toward the algebra classroom with their notebooks. The echo of shoes and chatter bounced off the lockers. Bucky trailed a step behind Steve, his shoulders hunched, face set in that tight, unreadable way that meant he was somewhere else inside his head.

Steve slowed, frowning. He'd seen Bucky quiet before, but this was different. It was way sharper and heavier. He reached out, catching his friend by the wrist before they could slip into the classroom with the others.

"Buck," Steve said softly, tugging him toward the row of lockers. "What's up with you?"

"Nothing." Bucky's answer was clipped, quick. His gaze flicked away, jaw tight.

Steve tilted his head, not buying it. "Don't give me that. You've been sour since the library."

Bucky let out a dry laugh, humorless. "Yeah, well, maybe I don't like my best friend takin' someone else's side."

Steve blinked. "Peggy? That's what this is about?"

Bucky's mouth twisted, the words spilling faster now, like he couldn't stop them once they started. "It ain't just Peggy, alright? It's-" He dragged a hand through his hair, voice rising before he lowered it again, aware of the eyes around them. "My old man's on my back, beating my damn ass up 'cause I came home drunk. Ma's breathin'

down my neck, wantin' me to pray and read the damn Bible like that's gonna fix anything. Becca won't even look at me without sayin' I ruined the whole house. And now-" His voice cracked faintly, raw. "Now even you stand there defendin' some nosy girl who don't know a damn thing about me."

Steve's chest tightened. He stepped closer, lowering his voice. "Buck…"

Bucky kept going, restless, words spilling over themselves. "Feels like everyone hates me lately, y'know? Like, no matter what I do, it's wrong. Home's hell, school's hell. And then you-" He broke off, shaking his head. "You're supposed to be the one place I don't get that from."

Steve's heart ached at the way Bucky's voice wobbled, the way his hands fidgeted restlessly at his sides. He wasn't angry, not really. He was hurt. Wounded deeper than the bruise on his cheek.

"Hey," Steve said gently, reaching out. He laid a hand on Bucky's arm, grounding him. "It's okay. I hear you. I'm sorry, Buck. Really. I wasn't tryin' to take anyone's side. I just didn't want a fight."

Bucky pressed his lips together, eyes tearing up.

Steve gave a little nod, soft and certain. "You're right. I should've had your back better. I'm sorry."

For a moment, Bucky stood frozen, chest rising and falling like he'd run a mile. Then Steve tugged him closer, wrapping his arms around him. A hug, firm and steady.

Bucky's breath hitched against his shoulder. He leaned in, stiff at first, then let himself lean into the hold. Just for a second. Just long enough to feel like maybe someone was still on his side.

Steve murmured quietly against his hair. "It's you and me, Buck. Always. Don't forget that."

When they finally pulled apart, Bucky swiped quickly at his face, wiping the tears before anyone would see them and ask stupid questions again.

Down the hall, Peggy Carter glanced back as she stepped into the classroom. Her eyes caught the two boys by the lockers. The way Steve's hands still lingered on Bucky's arms, the closeness of their

exchange. Her brow furrowed faintly before she turned away and disappeared into the room.

—

The late afternoon bus rattled along the streets of Brooklyn, the usual after-school crowd packed into its worn leather seats. Steve and Bucky sat together near the back, their satchels clutched in their laps. The long day had left the bus buzzing with chatter, kids talking about the day, gossiping about dances, or arguing over who copied from whom.

Steve leaned against the window, fingers drumming on his old leather satchel. “You think I passed?” he asked, half-serious, half-hopeful.

Bucky smirked, stretching his legs out into the aisle. “You didn’t fall asleep, you didn’t doodle the whole time, and you didn’t hand in a blank page. That’s already better than last time.”

Steve gave him a flat look, then broke into a laugh. “So that’s a yes?”

Bucky shrugged, but his eyes softened. “You did good, Stevie. You kept your head down and worked through the problems. I think you’re better at it than you give yourself credit for.”

Steve’s grin widened a little, a blush creeping to his ears. Compliments always hit different coming from Bucky. “Only ‘cause you drilled me with all those practice sheets.”

“Drilled you? You mean saved your sorry ass.” Bucky smirked again, leaning back with his arms crossed. “I wasn’t about to let you fail while I passed. We’re in this together.”

The bus jolted over a pothole, and Steve’s bag slid almost off his lap. He caught it and glanced sideways. “Well, at least one of us didn’t sweat through his shirt about it.”

Bucky chuckled, a tired but real sound. “Please. I’ve been handling tests since third grade. The only thing I sweat about is listenin’ to Miss Greyhair read her prayers.”

Steve snorted. “Don’t let her hear you call her that. She’d have you writing reflection essays till your hand falls off.”

The boys laughed quietly, their shoulders brushing as the bus turned a corner. The world outside was alive and busy. Shops buzzing with customers buying the last supplies for dinner, kids playing stickball in

alleys.

As the bus neared Bucky's stop, Steve stood as the brakes screeched, grabbing the rail.

Bucky frowned. "Hey, this ain't your stop."

Steve shrugged, his tone deliberately casual. "So? I'll walk you home."

"Steve-"

"No arguments. You don't gotta thank me. I just wanna make sure you're alright, okay?"

Bucky huffed, like he wanted to argue but didn't have the heart for it. Instead, he shoved his satchel under his arm and followed Steve off the bus.

The streets of their neighborhood looked the same every afternoon. Boys on bicycles and somewhere, someone's radio was playing through an open window.

Steve walked close beside Bucky, his small frame almost comical next to his friend's taller, broader one. But it was clear who was looking out for whom.

Steve studied him, reading the boy's facial expressions. "You're really sure you don't wanna come back to mine? Ma won't mind. She'd probably be happy you stayed another night."

Bucky shook his head, a faint sigh escaping. "The more I avoid her, the worse it gets. You don't get it, Steve. My ma- she… she don't like when I'm gone without explainin' it. The longer I stay away, the more she's gonna fuss around. Might as well face her now before she decides to send a priest after me."

Steve frowned, hands tightening on his books. "What about your dad?"

Bucky's face darkened, but he kept walking. "Long as I behave, keep my head down, he don't notice me. Did well on the test, didn't sneak off anywhere I wasn't supposed to since Saturday… should be alright."

Steve slowed his pace a little, his worry plain. "That ain't the same as safe, Buck."

Bucky glanced at him, and for a moment, his tough front softened. "I

know. But it's what I got." He forced a smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Don't worry, Stevie. I'll be fine."

They reached the Barnes house, its neat white-painted fence standing crisp against the green of the yard. Tulips lined the walk, their heads bobbing gently in the breeze. One of the two family cars sat in the driveway.

Steve stopped at the fence gate, his hand resting on the worn wood. He turned to Bucky, voice low and earnest. "I mean it, Buck. You don't feel safe, you come to me. Anytime. Doesn't matter when. You knock, and I'll let you in."

Bucky stood there a moment, staring at his friend's worried face. His chest ached at the sincerity of it. Finally, he gave a small, tired smile. "I know. Thanks, Stevie."

Steve lingered, almost hesitant to open the gate. "You sure?"

"Yeah." Bucky's voice was steady, even if his eyes were tired. "Go on home. I'll be fine."

Steve exhaled slowly, nodded once, and stepped back. He watched as Bucky pushed the gate open, his shoulders tensing up as he walked up the path toward the porch.

Just before he reached the door, Bucky glanced back over his shoulder. For a fleeting second, his grin was real, boyish, like nothing could touch him.

—

The Barnes house was quiet when Bucky pushed through the front door. The smell of fresh bread drifted faintly from the kitchen. He let the door click shut behind him and set his satchel down on one of the steps of the stairs, calling softly into the silence.

"Ma? I'm home."

Her voice answered from the back of the house, brisk as always. "James? That you?"

"Yeah." He rubbed a hand down his face, already bracing himself.

She appeared from the kitchen, apron tied around her waist, her dark hair pinned back in a bun like on most days. She blinked at him,

surprise flickering across her features. “I thought you went off with Steve again. Didn’t expect you before supper.”

Bucky shifted his weight from foot to foot, offering her a small smile. “Nah, came straight home after school today.”

She crossed her arms, her sharp eyes narrowing in that way that always made him feel twelve years old again. “You’ve been gone too much, James. Sleeping out without asking us first. Coming home late. You know I don’t like it.”

“I know, Ma.” He kept his tone soft, careful. “I’m sorry. Won’t happen again.”

Her sigh was long, weary, but not cruel. She tugged at her apron strings, shaking her head. “You’re a good boy, James. But you test me sometimes. My nerves…” She pressed a hand to her chest for emphasis.

Bucky stepped closer, voice low, charming. “Didn’t mean to, Ma. I just… Steve needed help studying. He’s bad at algebra, you know. Couldn’t leave him hanging.”

That drew the faintest smile from her, though her brow stayed creased. “Always looking after that boy.”

“Somebody’s gotta.” Bucky’s lips quirked faintly, but he stayed careful.

She motioned toward the kitchen, and he followed her in. The lunch dishes were stacked by the sink, a pot still warm on the stove. Sunlight fell in pale stripes across the linoleum, catching on the edges of the neat little tulip curtains she insisted on keeping even though they were fading.

“When you stayed there last night… you didn’t tell Ms. Rogers anything, did you? About… your father?”

The question was quiet, but it made Bucky’s throat tighten. He forced himself to shake his head. “No. I didn’t tell her anything, Ma. I swear.”

She finally looked at him then, studying his face, searching for hints of a lie. At last, she nodded. “Good boy. It’s not her business. She wouldn’t understand our ways. Americans… they let their children run wild. That’s not how you raise a boy like you.”

A boy like him. The words sank like stones in his chest. *A boy like him* deserved everything they did to him? Maybe…

He nodded, though something inside him ached. He wanted so badly to say something. That he wasn't some different breed of child who needed all these "measures" and "rules" and the sting of a belt when he made mistakes. He wanted to ask why she stood by so often, why she let his father's hand bruise his skin, why her voice was never loud enough to stop him before it started.

But the words wouldn't come. They sat in his throat, heavy and choking, and all he could manage was a quiet, "I know, Ma."

Her voice softened then, almost affectionate. "I didn't like what he did Saturday. I told him so. But a slap now and then… sometimes it keeps a boy on the straight path. You'll understand one day, when you're older."

Bucky's jaw clenched, the ache spreading deeper through his chest. He wanted to believe her when she said she cared, that she fought for him. And sometimes she did, he remembered her standing at the foot of the stairs that night, yelling at his father to stop, her voice breaking. But it wasn't enough. Not really. Not when she still believed a "little slap" was fine, when she thought discipline was love.

He looked at her, at the little wrinkles around her blue eyes. He loved her. He hated disappointing her. And he hated, hated that she wasn't more of a shield.

So he swallowed it all down, pushed the ache deeper where she couldn't see it, and managed a faint smile. "I'll do better, Ma."

Her hand brushed his cheek then, not rough, but tender. "That's all I ask, James."

—

The living room smelled faintly of laundry detergent, the piles of fresh-dried clothes stacked neatly on the couch between Bucky and Becca. She was all focused, folding towels and dresses with sharp, even lines, while Bucky worked more slowly. He sorted socks into pairs, laying out undershirts and his and their father's boxers with care. Becca had refused to touch those, so he had been stuck with this chore for a while already.

The television murmured across the room, showing grainy footage of

soldiers training, reports about tensions in Europe, and Roosevelt's latest words. Bucky only watched with half an eye, his mind elsewhere, his body at ease despite his terrible posture when he fiddled with the socks on his lap.

The front door opened. The sound of polished shoes on the floorboards carried into the house, and Becca immediately straightened, folding faster, sharper, as though the man's presence demanded it. Bucky's stomach twisted, his hands cramping around a mismatched sock.

George Barnes stepped into the hallway, pulling off his coat and hanging it on the hook he always claimed for his office coat. His hair, once almost black, now flecked with gray at the temples, was slicked neatly back. His beard was trimmed close. The smell of cigarettes clung to him.

"Valeria." His voice carried, deep and gravelly. "I'm home."

"In the kitchen!" she called back. The sound of pots clattering followed.

He slipped off his shoes, an unspoken rule, enforced from the time the children were small, and only then moved toward the living room. His brown eyes checked the space, landing immediately on his son sitting on the couch.

Bucky sat straighter, suddenly aware of his too-long hair falling over his forehead, of the faint bruise that still darkened his cheek. He wished, uselessly, that it was gone.

George's gaze hardened. "James."

Bucky swallowed. "Dad." His voice was careful, respectful.

His father's lip curled downward faintly. "What's this?" He gestured toward Bucky's hair with a flick of his fingers. "You look like a homeless. Comb it."

"Yes, sir." Bucky's voice was low, obedient. He smoothed a hand through his hair, even though he knew it wouldn't satisfy him.

George's eyes lingered on the bruise then, and the silence that followed was heavier than the air in the room. "Still haven't healed from that, I see." His tone carried disappointment, not concern.

Becca's hands stilled for only a moment before she bent over the laundry again, lips pressed thin.

Bucky dropped his gaze. "No."

His father exhaled through his nose, the sound sharp. "And you weren't even home last night. Slept at Steve's, I heard, did you?"

Bucky's pulse jumped. He could already feel the trap. Any answer would be wrong. He kept his tone even. "Yes, sir. I, uh, I called Mama and asked her first. I wouldn't have without permission."

From the kitchen, Valeria's voice floated in. "He did call me, George."

George grunted, but his eyes stayed locked on Bucky. "Why?"

Bucky hesitated only a second before answering, the lie rehearsed in his head long before now. "We were studying algebra. Took longer than we thought it would, and it didn't seem right to walk home after midnight. Didn't want to worry mama."

He didn't dare say the truth, that he hadn't wanted to face this exact moment last night, that he'd wanted to stay where he felt safe. At Steve's place, no scary man walked in through the door and asked about every little mistake you made that day.

George stood in the doorway, his tall frame filling the doorway easily. His jaw was sharp, the same shape as Bucky's. "Worry your mother." He repeated the word like it was flimsy. "That didn't concern you last Friday when you acted like a ratty alcoholic, huh?"

"It should've."

His father's expression barely shifted, but Bucky knew that was its own warning. He lowered his gaze to the laundry again, folding slowly, carefully, making his movements neat.

Respect. Always respect. He knew the rules.

Don't raise your voice. Don't argue. Don't fidget. Show obedience in every word.

If you followed those rules and had a bit of luck, maybe you'd be left alone.

George's gaze lingered another long moment before he finally moved again, heading toward the kitchen to greet his wife properly. Bucky let

out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, his shoulders slumping just slightly.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

There's a major abuse scene right at the beginning of this chapter, including graphic violence and extreme verbal abuse. I honestly struggled with writing it because it's so heartbreaking, so I kept it as short as I could. If you'd rather not read it, you can skip the entire section written in cursive.
Other than that, please try not to get too mad at Steve even if he is kind of pushing you into it :)

I will hopefully upload a few more chapters tomorrow. If not, it probably means I got kidnapped by exam prep and will see you all again next week. Thank you so, so much for all the comments, kudos, feedback, and love for this story so far. I genuinely appreciate every single comment, even when I don't manage to reply right away. I'm really excited to see where this little story goes and how many of you will tag along as it grows.

Have a lovely day <3

Thursday, May 4th, 1940 - 48 days left

Friday Night, April 28th - Bucky

The lock clicked softly as Bucky slid his key into the front door, his movements slowed by the alcohol still warm in his blood. He pushed the door open carefully, half-hoping, half-praying that the house would be dark, silent, asleep. Mickey and he had stretched their night at the bar as far as they could, lingering over watery beer and cheap laughter until nearly two in the morning. Bucky had been stalling, dragging his heels, because he knew what would be waiting for him here, if anyone was awake.

But the second he stepped inside, his heart sank.

The kitchen light was on. Its glow spilled across the hallway floor like a warning.

Bucky froze, fingers tightening on the edge of the door. Maybe it was Becca. Maybe his mother. Maybe they'd just forgotten to turn it off.

But then he heard the scrape of a chair against linoleum. A cough. And his father's voice.

"You're late."

The words landed like a bomb.

Bucky swallowed hard and turned toward the kitchen, his boots heavy on the floorboards. George Barnes sat at the table in his sleepwear, cigarette smoldering in an ashtray beside him. His brown eyes were sharp, narrowed against the smoke curling upward.

Bucky's mouth was dry. "We lost track of time. I was with Mickey-"

His father cut him off. "Don't feed me excuses." He leaned forward, palms flat on the table. "What kind of man sneaks into his own house at this hour? Reeking like a saloon rat."

Bucky's shoulders sank. He hadn't even realized how strong the stink of beer must've been until now. He tried again, quieter. "We were just… we were at the bar, Dad. Nothin' bad happened. I didn't cause trouble."

"Bar." George spat the word. "You're seventeen. You don't belong in a bar. You belong in this house. You belong in your books. But you don't know the first thing about belonging, do you?"

Bucky flinched at the scrape of the chair as his father stood. He was tall, broad-shouldered, casting a shadow across the kitchen.

"Sir, I-"

The slap came sharp, sudden, the sting spreading across Bucky's cheek before he could finish. His head snapped to the side, but he caught himself, teeth gritted.

"Don't you 'sir' me like some soldier who's earned the right," George growled. "You're no soldier. You're nothin' but a boy wasting his time."

"I'm not wasting-" The words slipped out before he could swallow them.

Another slap. Harder.

"Backtalk?" George's voice rose. "You come into my house, you drink yourself stupid, and you dare backtalk me?"

Bucky's chest heaved. His fists curled at his sides to keep from trembling. "I was with Mickey. I wasn't alone. I didn't do anything wrong."

"You embarrassed yourself. You shame this family, James. You shame me." His father's hand caught his shoulder, shoving him back a step, shaking him like he was smaller than he was. "You think you're a man? Men don't crawl home drunk. Men have discipline. Men have respect."

His father's hand fisted in the front of his shirt, jerking him forward. The smell of smoke and sweat and whiskey stung his nose.

Another shove came next, hard against the counter's edge. Bucky's back hit wood, rattling a bowl. His father's voice rose, sharp and furious. "You think staggering home at this hour like some drunk in the gutter is nothing wrong? You think I fought a war, broke my back in an office, for you to drag our name through the mud?"

"I'm not-!" Bucky tried to speak, but the words strangled in his throat as the next blow landed, this one heavier, his father's fist pulling back from his side.

Bucky's eyes teared up. The room blurred as his father hit him over and over again.. He raised an arm instinctively, trying to shield his face, but the next shove sent him stumbling against the wall.

"Please-"

"Don't you 'please' me, James!" George shouted, loud enough to make the boy flinch. "You'll learn, one way or another."

It wasn't just the ache of the hits that hurt. It was the words, the weight of them, the way each one dug deep into that part of Bucky that never felt enough. Not disciplined enough. Not respectful enough. Not the son his father wanted.

At some point, he wasn't sure when, the pounding of fists and shoves blurred together, his body swaying with the rhythm of it. His cheek, his ribs, his shoulder, sharp aches already beginning to bloom beneath his skin.

And then-

"GEORGE!"

His mother's voice cut through the storm. The creak of the stairs, hurried steps, and her figure suddenly appearing on the staircase. Her hair was loose, her nightgown pulled around her, eyes wide with shock and fury.

"Stop it! Stop it right now!"

George froze, his hand still clenched in Bucky's shirt. Valeria rushed forward, shoving herself between them, her own hands pushing at her husband's chest. "Are you out of your mind? He's your son!"

"He needs to learn!" George roared back, grabbing the woman by the arms.

Valeria's voice rose sharper as she freed herself from the tall man's grip. "Enough. He's a boy, George! Do you hear me? He's our son!"

George's nostrils widened, but he stepped back, dragging a hand down his face. "Your boy is one mistake away from ruining everything."

Bucky stood there, back pressed against the counter behind him, chest heaving, bruises already forming. His mother turned to him, eyes softer now but wet with something close to fear.

"Go upstairs, James," she said firmly. "Now."

His knees wobbled, but he obeyed, slipping past them both, dragging himself toward the stairs while his parents' voices fought behind him.

The last thing he heard before his bedroom door closed was his mother's voice, breaking with fury. "Are you trying to kill him, George?! He's your son, you can't beat him like this! Not again!"

Steve and Bucky walked side by side toward their homeroom, brushing shoulders in the lazy way of two boys who'd known each other all their lives. It felt good. Normal. After the strain of the past days, the tension in Bucky's shoulders had eased, just a bit. He laughed a little louder, leaned a little closer, and even the bruise on his face was starting to turn yellow, a sign that it was starting to heal.

The bell hadn't rung yet, so the boys paused by the classroom door, trading quiet jokes and glances. That's when Peggy Carter appeared at the end of the hall, her books hugged against her chest. She spotted Steve instantly.

"Steve!"

Bucky turned his head as Peggy came closer, her dark hair tied neatly back, her dress collar smoothed perfectly in place. She smiled, but the smile wasn't for Bucky.

She caught Steve lightly by the sleeve before he could step into the

classroom. “Could I… borrow you for a moment?”

Steve blinked, a little startled, but nodded. “Uh, sure. Just a second, Buck.”

Bucky shrugged, though something in his chest pulled tight for a heartbeat. He pushed into the classroom, dropping into his usual seat, while outside in the hall, Peggy leaned toward Steve.

“I was wondering,” she said, her accent crisp, “if you might come by my place tomorrow after school. I want to start drawing, and you’re really quite good. I’d love if you could… show me a little? Teach me the basics?”

Steve’s ears flushed pink. “Teach you? Oh… Uh- yeah, sure. Drawing’s not too fancy, but if you wanna learn, I can show you.”

Peggy’s smile widened, pleased. “Tomorrow, then. After school.”

“Tomorrow,” Steve repeated, nodding earnestly, completely oblivious to the undercurrent in her request. To him, it was no different than Joey asking him to help with history notes.

Inside the classroom, Bucky sat with his chair tipped back, pencil rolling between his fingers. He glanced up when Steve finally slid into the seat beside him, a bit out of breath.

“What was that about?” Bucky asked casually, tilting his head toward the door where Peggy entered and approached her seat in the first row next to Dot, who fixed her ginger braids in a pocket mirror.

Steve scratched at the back of his neck, eyes flicking down to his notebook. “Oh, uh. Nothing much. Just… she wanted to ask about class stuff.”

Bucky raised an eyebrow. “Class stuff?”

“Yeah,” Steve said quickly, offering a crooked grin. “You know, like history. She knows I’m good at it.”

It wasn’t exactly the truth, but it wasn’t exactly a lie either. More importantly, it was enough to keep the calm between them.

Bucky studied him for a second longer, then let it go, leaning back with an easy shrug. “Huh. Fair enough.”

The tension melted, and soon enough they were whispering jokes

again while waiting for the teacher to start. Steve told himself it was just drawing, nothing more. Peggy wanted to learn, and he liked to teach. No reason to mention anything that might weigh heavier on Bucky's shoulders.

At least, that's what he told himself.

—

Bucky's bedroom had always felt like their own little world. The blue walls always had this calming effect on you, books stacked high on the shelf, their schoolbag slumped against the desk leg. On the nightstand sat the battered radio, the volume turned up louder than usual. Loud enough that if anyone passed the door, all they'd hear was jazz music, static, or the occasional clipped voice of a news reporter. Bucky always said it was "just in case."

Steve sat cross-legged on the narrow bed, fiddling with a pencil, mumbling about something random. Whether they'd covered the right material in history today, or how the new cigarettes Charlie and Richie had smoked had smelled worse than usual. He didn't seem to mind filling the quiet with chatter. Around Bucky, he suddenly turned into an extrovert.

Bucky turned the lock on his door without a second thought. He always did when Steve came over, innocent on the surface but protective too. He wanted the space to be theirs.

When he turned back, Steve was still blabbing, head bent, thin fingers busy doodling nonsense on the back of an old worksheet. Bucky crossed the room slowly, leaning his shoulder against the wall for a moment, just watching.

Then, without a word, he pushed himself off and closed the last step of distance. He caught Steve's face with his hand, leaned down, and kissed him.

Steve blinked, surprised mid-sentence, but didn't resist. His pencil rolled forgotten onto the sheets as Bucky pushed further, mouth insistent. He climbed onto the bed and perched on Steve's lap, pushing him down with ease, his weight pressing the smaller boy into the mattress.

Steve made a muffled sound, half protest, half surrender.

Bucky ignored it, moving his mouth down from Steve's lips to his

jawline, pressing small, hungry kisses along his neck, his collarbone, across his shoulders, where he pushed the boy's shirt away. He took Steve's hands and kissed the knuckles too.

The air thickened, the room shrinking until it was only the two of them. Bucky's body pressed close, his thighs bracketing Steve's narrow frame, his hips shifting until his crotch brushed against Steve's. The pressure made Steve stiffen, not in resistance but in the stunned way he always did when Bucky was bolder.

Steve lay back, submissive, letting it happen. He wasn't useless exactly, but he didn't know what to do with his hands, with his voice, with the way his pulse jumped. So he just listened, listened to the radio crackling, to the hum of Bucky's breath against his skin.

Then the radio cut suddenly from music to news. A sharp voice filled the room. The talk of Europe, masses of refugees crossing the ocean to America, and fear spreading across countries that Steve had only read about.

Steve's eyes fluttered open. He whispered, half to himself, "I feel bad for the people there… the innocent ones. Caught in all of it."

Bucky pulled back just enough to glance at him, annoyance flickering in his blue eyes. He pressed a finger lightly to Steve's lips. "Shh. You're ruining the mood, punk."

Steve flushed. "Sorry, I just-"

Bucky grinned faintly, though it didn't reach all the way to his eyes. "Relax. Not everything has to be about the war or the world falling apart." He nipped at Steve's jaw again, trying to get Steve into the mood for whatever sexual activity Bucky has planned for today.

But Steve's mind wasn't entirely there. A thought gnawed at him, the promise he'd made Peggy in the hallway. She'd been so eager, so hopeful, and he'd agreed without a second thought. Teaching her drawing, she'd said, but Steve wasn't naive enough not to sense the weight behind her words when he replayed them now.

His stomach twisted. Was that… wrong? To go? To not tell Bucky?

He shut his eyes, trying to focus on Bucky's warmth, the familiar scent of soap and aftershave, the weight pressing him down. But his head wouldn't quiet.

Bucky noticed. Of course, he noticed. His kisses slowed, then stopped. He pulled back, sitting upright on Steve's lap, hands braced against Steve's narrow sides. His expression was searching, uncertain.

"You're not here," Bucky muttered, frowning. "Your head's somewhere else."

Steve startled. "What? No, I-"

Bucky shook his head, pushing off the bed and running a hand through his hair. "Look, you could've just said you're not in the mood. You don't have to sit there like- like you're waiting for it to be over."

Steve sat up quickly, guilt spreading in his chest. "Buck, no. It's not that. I swear-"

"Then what is it?" Bucky asked, softer now but wounded all the same. "You drift off, you get that look like you'd rather be anywhere else."

Steve opened his mouth, closed it. He couldn't tell him. Not now. Not when Bucky was already so raw from home, from his father, from everything.

So he just shook his head, reaching out to put a hand on Bucky's arm. "I'm sorry. Really. It's not you. It's never you."

Bucky's jaw twitched, but he gave a short nod. "Alright. Then let's just… do something else, yeah?"

Steve managed a small smile. "Yeah. Sure."

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

> Studying for exams is overrated, right? hehe
>
> No warnings this time unless an excessive amount of Peggy Carter screentime counts as a trigger. Jokes aside, I tried not to make her too terrible in this story, so please trust the process and don't throw tomatoes at her just yet <3

Friday, May 5th, 1940 - 47 days left

The sun filtered weakly through the thin curtains of the Rogers' apartment, painting pale gold across the cramped bedroom. Steve was standing in front of the warped mirror fixed to the door, running a comb through his blond hair for what felt like the third time. His shirt collar kept moving no matter how he fussed with it.

He wasn't exactly dressing up. Just choosing clean slacks and a neat shirt. Something that didn't scream my mom struggles to pay the bills the moment he walked into a room. He stood there longer than necessary, fingers worrying the fabric, weighing every choice like it mattered more than it should.

Steve didn't own many nice clothes. Not the kind meant for dance halls or dim lights or meeting girls who didn't have to think twice about how much their dress had cost. Most of what he had was practical, worn thin at the edges, carefully mended by his mother's hands. Good enough for school. Good enough for seeing Bucky. Maybe not good enough for this.

He paused, looking at himself in the mirror, uncertainty tightening his throat. He wasn't even sure he should go. He'd probably stand there doubting it until the very last second, one hand on the doorknob, heart racing for no good reason.

Maybe this wasn't right. Maybe none of it was.

And yet, he kept the shirt on.

Peggy's voice lingered in his head from yesterday, bright and clear.

"I was wondering if you might come by my place tomorrow after school. I want to start drawing, and you're really quite good. I'd love if you could…

show me a little? Teach me the basics?"

Steve had said yes. Too quickly. Too thoughtlessly.

Now, as he started to tie his laces, his stomach twisted. The plan had seemed harmless enough. Just teaching her to draw, nothing more. But he couldn't shake the feeling that it was more. That he was stepping somewhere dangerous without telling Bucky.

The shrill ring of the telephone in the hallway startled him. He hurried out, loose shoes sliding on the wooden floor, and snatched the receiver from its hook.

"Hello?"

There was a bit of static, then a voice that made his chest unclench. Bucky.

"Hey, Stevie. You busy?" His tone was easy, casual, the kind that usually dragged a smile out of Steve without fail. "I was thinking we could hit up the comic shop. Maybe Mickey or Joey'll come along too. Haven't been in a while."

Steve froze. The comb was still in his other hand, his shoes half-tied. The perfect invitation. Normal, simple, exactly what he wanted most. Spend some time with Bucky, their kind of time.

But Peggy was waiting.

His throat tightened. He hesitated just long enough that Bucky noticed. "You there?"

"Y-yeah," Steve said quickly, pressing his hand against the telephone's cool body as if that could steady him. His mouth went dry. He could hear Bucky's faint background noise, the radio in his room, and his sister moving around. Ordinary home sounds. Steve wanted nothing more than to say yes, of course, meet me in ten.

Instead, the lie tumbled out, clumsy but steady enough. "Can't today, Buck. Mom's got me running errands. Picking up a few things before dinner, you know."

There was silence on the line for a heartbeat. Then Bucky's voice, light as always, no suspicion creeping in."Ah, gotcha. No problem, pal. Another time then."

Steve swallowed hard, gripping the receiver tighter. His knuckles turned white. “Yeah… another time.”

Bucky chuckled faintly, the sound soft through the line. “Don’t work too hard, alright? I’ll see you Monday at school if not before.”

“Yeah. See you.” Steve’s voice cracked on the last word, but Bucky didn’t seem to notice.

The line clicked. The hum of emptiness filled Steve’s ear.

Slowly, he placed the receiver back on the hook. He stood there for a long moment in the hallway, staring at the pale yellow paint peeling along the wall, listening to the creak of pipes somewhere deep in the building.

Steve wasn’t the type to lie. He had never been. Not to his mother, not to Bucky. And now he had, twice in less than two days.

The guilt sat heavily in his chest as he turned back toward his room, the memory of Bucky’s voice clinging to him like a weight he couldn’t shake.

He grabbed his sketchbook anyway. He had promised Peggy. But for the first time, keeping a promise didn’t feel good. It felt like betrayal.

—

Steve adjusted his satchel strap nervously as he stood in front of the neat brownstone on a quieter street a few blocks from the school. The place had that new-but-lived-in look. Curtains already hanging, but the front yard still bare, a couple of flower pots sitting empty on the steps as if waiting for someone to remember them. Peggy and her family had only recently moved from London, and it showed.

He knocked gently. The door opened quickly, and Peggy herself stood there, smiling widely. She wore a pale blouse tucked into a navy skirt, her hair brushed perfectly into place. She looked… well, like she always did. Confident.

“You found it,” she said with a little grin, stepping aside.

“Uh, yeah. Not too far,” Steve replied, ducking in. His voice cracked just slightly, and he cleared his throat.

The entryway smelled faintly of tea. Boxes were still stacked along one

wall, labeled with neat handwriting. Basement, Books, Winter Coats. Steve glanced at them as Peggy watched him slip out of his shoes and take everything in.

Before Peggy could steer him towards the staircase, a voice floated from the kitchen. “Margaret? Who’s that?”

“My friend from school, Mum,” Peggy called back. She glanced over her shoulder at Steve. “Come say hello.”

Steve awkwardly tugged at his sleeves as they entered the kitchen. A woman with the same sharp eyes as Peggy turned from the stove. Her accent was richer, more clipped, and her graying hair pinned up.

“This must be Steve,” she said warmly, drying her hands on a towel.

“Yes, ma’am,” Steve said quickly, standing straighter. “It’s, uh, nice to meet you.”

Her smile softened. “I’ll let you two be. Tea’s in the pot if you’d like any, Margaret.”

“Thanks, Mum,” Peggy said, tugging Steve gently toward the hall.

Steve felt the woman’s eyes on him until they disappeared up the stairs. Peggy’s room was at the end of the hallway, its door propped open. The space was larger than his own, tidy but clearly mid-unpacking. Books stacked on the floor, a desk by the window, her bed made crisply.

“You can sit,” Peggy offered, gesturing to the desk chair while she carried a stool from her vanity over.

Steve nodded and sat, balancing his sketchbook on his lap. His palms were sweaty. He’d thought this was going to be all about drawing, but something in her smile made his chest feel tight.

“So,” she said lightly, “you promised to show me how you sketch.”

“Uh, right,” Steve mumbled, opening the sketchbook. He flipped to a blank page, pencil already tucked into the binding. He could feel her eyes on him, curious and amused. His ears burned.

She leaned forward, her chin propped in her hand. “You’re awfully nervous, Steven.”

“No, I uh, just don’t teach much, is all,” he muttered, drawing faint

lines. His hand shook slightly, which didn't help.

Peggy laughed softly. "It's quite endearing. You're not used to having girls around, are you?"

Steve nearly choked on air. "I, uh, no, not really."

Her smile deepened like she'd just uncovered a secret. "That's alright. We'll keep it simple."

For the next few minutes, Steve demonstrated basic shading, how to map a face with soft strokes. He tried to focus, explaining clumsily, but every time their eyes met, he felt his throat close.

Peggy leaned closer, her shoulder brushing his as she peered at the page. "You're very good. Steady hand."

Steve laughed nervously. "You should see me in algebra."

She chuckled, then grew quiet, watching him. Steve finally looked up and realized how close she was. Her eyes lingered on his mouth for a heartbeat before she leaned in.

Steve froze. Her lips brushed his cheek, aiming to his lips. At the last second, he jerked back, heat flooding his face.

"I- I, uh- sorry," he stammered, gripping his pencil like it was a lifeline.

Peggy blinked, a flicker of surprise crossing her features before she composed herself. "Oh. You're shy, aren't you?"

Steve shook his head quickly. "No, I just- I mean- I don't…" He trailed off, cheeks burning.

She smiled again, softer this time. "It's alright, Steve. You don't have to rush."

Steve nodded mutely, heart pounding. He bent back over the page, scribbling something that barely resembled a sketch. Peggy only watched him, clearly charmed, clearly mistaking his awkwardness for innocence instead of the guilt twisting in his gut.

Because all Steve could think about was Bucky. The way Bucky perched on his bed yesterday, kissing his jaw, laughing into his shoulder. And how wrong it felt to be here, with Peggy leaning in, when he hadn't even told him.

—

The hour at Peggy's felt like it stretched forever and yet vanished at once. Steve's sketchbook was closed again, tucked safely under his arm as he followed her down the stairs, heart pounding with every step. He was grateful her mother hadn't reappeared. One more pair of sharp eyes and he would've collapsed entirely.

At the door, Peggy slowed. She turned to face him, hands folded in front of her like she was trying not to spook him. The smile she gave was gentler than her usual confident smirk.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "If I pushed too quickly upstairs."

Steve immediately shook his head, too fast. "No, no, I just, uh, it's not-" His voice tangled. He bent down, fumbling with his shoes at the mat. His hands trembled as he tried to loop the laces, the bow falling apart once, twice.

Peggy crouched down without hesitation. "Here." She brushed his hands aside with ease, fingers deft as she tied one shoe, then the other. She might as well have been tying a child's laces, yet she didn't tease him for it. Instead, she gave a soft laugh.

"You're unlike the boys I've met here," she murmured as she tugged the last knot tight. "All loud and full of themselves, like they need the whole world to know they exist. You're… different. Quiet. Thoughtful. It's nice company. Rather endearing, really."

Steve felt heat rush all the way up his neck, into his ears. He stared at the floor, then at the door, then back at her. "I- I'm sorry I'm such a weirdo," he muttered, voice small.

Peggy's brow arched as though she found that amusing. She reached up suddenly, hand warm against his cheek. Steve froze under the touch, wide-eyed, not daring to breathe.

"You don't owe me anything," she said gently. "We can pretend the almost-kiss never happened. Move on like before. I'd still like to get to know you more, Steven Rogers. If you'll let me."

Steve swallowed hard, heart thudding painfully. He nodded, not trusting his voice.

Peggy smiled at that, standing and pulling the door open. Cool evening air spilled in. She didn't press him again, didn't tease or insist.

Just gave him one last nod.

“Get home safe.”

Steve ducked past her, murmured, “Thank you,” and hurried down the steps, clutching his sketchbook like a shield. His chest ached. She was kind, and she liked him, and still all he could think about was Bucky’s voice in his ear the night before, whispering, *you can just tell me if you don’t feel like it.*

The guilt twisted deeper with every step away from Peggy’s door.

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

> Content warning for extreme internalized homophobia. I'm also not entirely sure how to properly tag this, but religion is going to come up a lot in this story. And Bucky's relationship to it is… complicated. His concept of God, faith, and morality is deeply twisted by guilt, fear, and the way religion was used around him growing up. It's less belief and more self-punishment, and it explains how he sees himself throughout the fic. Please keep that in mind as you read <3

Saturday, May 6th, 1940 - 46 days left

Steve's legs felt like lead as he trudged up the familiar path to the Barnes house. Every step against the cracked pavement was heavier than the last, his stomach churning like he'd swallowed gravel. The closer he got to the white fence, the more the knot of guilt and dread twisted until it felt like his ribs were strangling his lungs.

He couldn't stop replaying Peggy's voice in his head. Her words were so soft, careful, patient in a way that made him feel so good about himself. As if she didn't see him as the scrawny, shy boy. The way her eyes had softened when he confessed, clumsy and embarrassed, that he wanted to draw. How harmless it had seemed in the moment. How quickly it had turned into something else, something he didn't know how to name.

But now, trudging toward the screen door, none of that seemed harmless anymore. Every inch forward felt like walking into a storm he'd brought on himself.

He rang the bell once. His hand trembled. Twice. Steve heard the familiar voice call out a simple "Imma get it, Ma". His breath caught in his chest when the door creaked open.

Bucky stood there, hair looking as if he had rolled out of bed not long ago, and immediately, he cracked a smile. "Steve?" There was genuine surprise in his voice, followed by something warm, almost relieved. "Hey- I thought- I didn't know you were-"

Steve's mouth opened, closed. His fingers curled into the fabric of his jacket.

“Hi,” he managed, barely above a mumble.

Bucky smiled, wide and easy, like the last few days of tension hadn’t existed. “Hey.” He leaned against the doorframe. “You alright?”

Steve nodded too quickly. “Yeah. I mean- sort of. I… can we talk?”

Bucky didn’t hesitate. “Yeah, sure.” He glanced back into the house, then stepped outside, pulling the door shut behind him with a soft click. “What’s up?”

They stood on the porch, the morning light slanting yellow across the street. Steve stared at the floorboards, his heart hammering so loud he was sure Bucky could hear it.

He took a breath.

Then another.

“I went to Peggy’s,” he blurted.

Bucky blinked. “You… went to Peggy’s?”

“Yeah,” Steve rushed on, words tumbling over each other now that he’d started. “Yesterday. After school. She asked if I could teach her some drawing, and I didn’t think it was- I mean, I didn’t think it was anything weird, it just sounded like-”

“Wait.” Bucky held up a hand, still calm, still trying to catch up. “You went over to her house to draw?”

Steve nodded, chewing on his lip. “Yeah. I know it sounds stupid when I say it out loud, but I really didn’t think it was-”

Bucky let out a short laugh, more confused than amused. “Okay. That’s… kinda random, but- I promised not be jealy anymore.” He shrugged. “Alright?”

God, the way Bucky said that… Steve winced internally, feeling worse and worse with every wholesome word leaving Bucky’s mouth.

Steve shook his head, panic creeping back in. “No. No, that’s not- that’s not all.”

Bucky’s smile faded, just a little.

Steve kept talking, afraid that if he stopped, he’d lose his nerve. “Her

family just moved here, and her house is still half empty, and I met her mum, and she was nice, and we were in her room, and I was showing her how to shade and-"

"Steve." Bucky's tone sharpened. "Why are you telling me all this? It's okay."

Steve finally looked up.

Because it wasn't okay.

"I lied to you," he said quietly. "On the phone. When you asked to go to the comic store. I told you I had errands."

Bucky's jaw tightened. "You lied?"

"I didn't mean to," Steve said quickly. "I just- you've been under so much stress, and I didn't want to add anything else, and I didn't even think-"

"So instead you lied," Bucky repeated, slower now.

Steve swallowed. "Yes."

The air shifted. Subtle, but unmistakable. Bucky straightened, his shoulders squaring, hands slipping into his pockets like he was bracing himself.

"And?" he asked. "Did you draw?"

"Yes," Steve said, nodding. "At first. We did. I showed her some stuff, and she was nice, and she said she liked my sketches, and I thought it was just that."

"Thought," Bucky echoed.

Steve winced. "I didn't know she- I didn't think she liked me like that. Nobody ever-"

Bucky's eyes narrowed slightly, irritation starting to seep through. "Steve. What happened."

Steve hesitated. His throat went dry.

Then the words slipped out before he could stop them.

"She suddenly leaned in to kiss me."

The porch went very, very quiet.

Bucky didn't react right away. He just stared at Steve, his face unreadable, eyes darkening. His jaw worked once, like he was grinding his teeth without realizing it.

"…She did what?" he asked, voice low.

Steve rushed on, panic flaring again. "I pulled back. I swear I did. I didn't kiss her, I didn't-"

"You went to her house," Bucky said slowly. "You lied to me. And she tried to kiss you."

Steve nodded, miserable. "Yes."

Bucky let out a sharp breath through his nose, the beginnings of anger finally cracking through the surface.

"And you didn't think any of that was worth mentioning?"

Steve's shoulders slumped. "I was going to. I just- I didn't want to hurt you."

Bucky laughed once, short and brittle.

"Oh, Stevie," he said quietly. "You really don't know when to stop digging, do you."

His foot tapped once against the porch boards. His gaze flicked away, then back to Steve, irritation simmering now, threatening to boil over.

"And let me guess," Bucky added, voice tightening. "You still don't think it was a date."

Steve opened his mouth but closed it immediately. He knew Bucky didn't believe him.

Bucky's breath came shallow now, his chest rising fast as Steve kept talking, trying to fix something that was already cracking apart.

"I didn't mean to lie," Steve said quickly. "I just- you've been going through so much lately and I didn't want to pile onto it. I didn't think it mattered because I didn't think it was anything like that-"

"Don't," Bucky snapped. His voice was sharp now, edged with something ugly. "Don't tell me it didn't matter."

Steve froze. “Buck-”

“The rules weren’t just for me,” Bucky cut in, stepping closer. “We didn’t make them so I could be the only one watching what I do.”

“I know,” Steve said desperately. “I know that. I just-”

“And you still went.” Bucky laughed, harsh and disbelieving. “You still went to her house. You still let her get close enough to think she could do that.”

Steve shook his head. “I didn’t let her. I pulled away. I swear.”

“That’s not the point!” Bucky shouted, the words finally breaking free. “How dare you go on a date?”

“It wasn’t a date!” Steve shot back, voice cracking. “I didn’t know it was!”

Bucky rounded on him. “Girls and boys don’t just hang out casually, Steven!”

Steve flinched at the way his full name was thrown like a weapon.

“I didn’t think she liked me like that,” Steve repeated for the dozenth time quietly, then louder, more desperate. “I really didn’t. Nobody ever has. Nobody except you. Girls don’t look at me that way. They never have.”

For a split second, Bucky looked stunned.

Then his face twisted.

“That’s not fair,” he said, voice shaking now, anger bleeding into something wounded and raw. “I changed for you. I took this seriously. I stopped doing everything you hated. I tried to be better. And you get to do the one thing I wasn’t allowed to?”

Steve stepped closer instinctively. “Buck, please-”

Bucky shoved him back against the porch railing. Not violently, but hard enough that Steve’s breath knocked out of him.

“This isn’t fair,” Bucky said, standing over him now, eyes blazing. “You don’t get to do this and then tell me it didn’t mean anything.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” Steve said, hands raised slightly, voice

trembling. “I never would-”

“You don’t understand,” Bucky interrupted, his voice breaking apart now. “I was never doing those things because I wanted to be a jerk. I kept telling myself I was supposed to. I prayed that if I tried hard enough to finally start like girls, it would work. That I’d feel something around a damn girl. That my fucking dick would do anything around a girl.”

Steve stared at him, chest tight.

“But I didn’t,” Bucky went on, words spilling out faster, like he couldn’t stop them anymore. “I was forcing myself into something I didn’t even want, because it was easier than admitting the truth. And the truth was always you.”

Steve’s eyes filled. “Bucky…”

“And now you tell me you might like girls too?” Bucky laughed weakly. “You get both. And I get- what? To sit here and watch you figure it out, which one is better, while I’m tearing myself apart?”

“That’s not what I want,” Steve said, shaking his head. “I only want-”

“It’s over,” Bucky said suddenly, voice flat, final. “I can’t do this.”

Steve’s heart dropped. “What?”

“You ruined it,” Bucky said, eyes glassy but unblinking. “You made me unlove girls, you made me love you, and now I don’t even get to keep it. I risk everything for you- my family, my future, everything- and you broke the one thing we agreed on.”

“I was going to tell you,” Steve whispered. “That’s why I came.”

Bucky shook his head slowly. “Too late.”

He turned away, opening the door.

“Bucky, please-”

“I don’t want to see you right now,” Bucky said, his back to him. “Not tomorrow. Not at school. Not until I figure out how to breathe again without feeling like this.”

The door slammed shut.

Steve stood frozen on the porch, the railing still cold against his back, his chest aching so badly it felt like something had been ripped out of him.

Inside, Bucky leaned against the door, eyes shut, fists clenched. Already regretting nothing and everything at the same time.

—

Steve didn't remember starting to walk.

One moment, he was standing on the Barnes' porch, the echo of the door slam still ringing in his ears, the next he was halfway down the block, hands shoved deep into his pockets, shoulders hunched like he was bracing against a wind that wasn't there. The sun felt wrong somehow, too bright, too normal for how hollow his chest felt.

His head replayed everything in fragments. Bucky's face when he'd said her name. The way his voice had sharpened, then cracked. The words that had come spilling out like they'd been waiting years for a chance to exist.

I changed for you. I risk everything for you.

Steve swallowed hard, his throat aching.

He hadn't known. God, he hadn't known any of it.

He'd always known Bucky was complicated, that there was something heavy under the jokes and the confidence and the way girls flocked to him like moths. But this? This depth of fear, this desperation to be something he wasn't. Steve had never seen it laid bare like that. He felt stupid now, naive in the worst way. He'd thought honesty meant saying what he felt, not realizing how much Bucky had been hiding just to survive.

And now he'd torn it open.

Steve's steps slowed as he crossed the familiar streets toward home, each one heavier than the last. He replayed the fight again and again, trying to find the moment where he could have said something different. Slower. Better. Tried harder to explain that he hadn't wanted Peggy, not really. That he hadn't even understood what she wanted. That his heart hadn't wandered the way Bucky thought it had.

But Bucky hadn't let him finish. Every word Steve offered had only poured more fuel onto something already burning too hot to control.

Girls and boys don't just hang out casually.

The words stung. Not because they were cruel, but because Steve had believed, truly believed, that he was so invisible, so unremarkable, that nobody would ever look at him and see something worth wanting. Bucky had been the exception. Always the exception. The miracle that made him feel seen.

He'd never meant to take advantage of that.

Steve's eyes burned, and he blinked hard, refusing to let tears spill out onto the street. He felt misunderstood in a way that hurt deeper than anger ever could. Like he'd been judged for something he hadn't even realized he was guilty of. Like he'd been punished for ignorance instead of intention.

And underneath it all was guilt. Thick, suffocating guilt.

Because Bucky had changed. Steve knew that. He'd seen it in the way Bucky watched himself now, in the restraint that didn't come naturally to him, in the effort he put into being careful. Steve hated himself for not seeing how fragile that effort really was, how much it had cost Bucky to hold himself together.

By the time he reached his apartment building, his chest felt bruised from the inside out.

The old brick structure loomed above him, stairs zigzagging up its side like a rusted spine. The stairwell was dim, hidden in the alley.

Each stair creaked under his weight. His legs ached, not from distance but from exhaustion, the kind that settled into your bones when your heart had been worked too hard.

Halfway up, he had to stop and grip the railing, his breathing shallow. He pressed his forehead briefly against the cool metal, eyes closing.

I didn't want this, he thought desperately. *I never wanted this.*

He forced himself onward.

When he finally reached their apartment, the door was ajar, warm light spilling out into the hallway. He stepped inside quietly, dropping

his bag by the wall. The radio was on low, some soft music playing, and the sound of movement came from the kitchen.

His mother was there.

Sarah Rogers stood at the stove, sleeves rolled up, her posture tired but familiar. She turned when she heard him, her face softening immediately at the sight of him.

“Steve?” she said gently. “You’re home quickly.”

He tried to speak. Nothing came out.

His throat closed, the dam finally breaking. He crossed the room in a few unsteady steps, stopping in front of her like he was suddenly very small again.

“Mom,” he whispered, voice shaking. He swallowed hard, eyes shining. “I… I need a hug.”

She didn’t ask a single question.

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Meet Dot, my shayla :)

Sunday, May 7th, 1940 - 45 days left

Sunday morning came too quickly for Bucky Barnes. He hadn't slept much, maybe an hour here, a doze there. Most of the night had been spent staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. His head pounded, his stomach churned, and his chest ached in ways he didn't even know how to name.

His mother found him curled up on top of the covers, still in yesterday's shirt. She sighed, not unkindly, and helped him up, brushing his hair into some semblance of neatness. He muttered that he'd had a fight with Steve, that he was "all messed up in the head," and she didn't push further. Instead, she pressed his church suit into his hands and told him that finding his way back to God would help him.

And so here he was, slumping in the pew alongside his family in the old Roman Catholic parish they'd been attending for decades. His father sat stiff, sharp suit pressed, chatting lowly with another veteran two rows up, one of his "buddies." His mother, in her Sunday dress and gloves, clasped her purse as if her life depended on it. Becca had already disappeared toward the front, whispering and giggling with a cluster of girls she'd grown up with.

Bucky sat alone in the middle of it all, hands jammed between his knees, hair refusing to stay flat no matter how hard his mother had tried to tame it. His eyes were bloodshot, dark smudges under them making him look older, worn out.

The chatter of the congregation filled the air. Old men greeting each other like it was the only place they ever spoke, women fussing over hats and dresses, the shuffle of hymnals. The priest moved about near the altar, preparing for Mass.

That was when Dot plopped down beside him.

Dot Miller, the ginger-haired girl from down the street, who always smelled faintly of lavender soap and carried herself with an

earnestness that set her apart from the other teenagers. She wasn't loud, never drank at parties, never snuck cigarettes in alleys. She was soft-spoken, polite to her elders, and rather shy in groups. But she had sharp eyes. Eyes that noticed.

"Bucky," she whispered, leaning slightly so only he could hear. "You look a mess."

He huffed a tired laugh, rubbing at his brow. "Thanks, Dot. Real confidence boost."

She tilted her head, unbothered by the sarcasm. "I mean it. Are you okay?"

Silence stretched. He stared down at the polished wood floor, his throat tight. He didn't want to answer. Didn't want to explain.

"Do you want to talk?" she pressed, gently, with that same patience she'd had since they were kids.

"No," he muttered. "I really don't."

"Come on." Her hand slipped through the crook of his arm, tugging. "Not here. Before Mass starts."

And somehow, impossibly, he let her. Maybe he was too tired to fight her, argue with her. Or maybe he deep down knew that he needed someone to talk to.

They slipped out a side door into the churchyard, which was quiet compared to the echo of voices inside. And like many old churches in Brooklyn, there was a graveyard tucked off to the side. Weathered stones tilted with age, an iron fence marking its borders. They sat on a bench just beyond it, the faint sound of the organ tuning inside drifting through the walls.

Dot folded her hands in her lap, eyes flicking toward him. "You don't have to say anything you don't want to. But I can tell… you're hurting. Really hurting."

Bucky let out a long breath, leaning forward, elbows on his knees. "I'm fine."

"Bucky." Her voice softened. "You're not. Not today."

He closed his eyes. Images burned in his head. Steve's hurt expression

on the porch, his father's hard stare, his mother's insistence that faith would fix everything. He swallowed hard. "I just… I had a fight with Steve. That's all."

Dot nodded slowly, not judging, not rushing. "He's your best friend. Everyone gets into a fight sometimes."

"Was." Bucky's voice cracked on the word. He bit it back, pressing his lips tight.

She studied him a moment. "You're trying to carry all of it alone."

He gave a helpless shrug. "My ma says I've gotta find my way back to God. That's what'll set me right. That's what'll make me… better." His voice dropped lower. "But what if it doesn't? What if something's wrong with me?"

Dot's expression softened even more. "Bucky…"

"I don't even know what that means," he went on, staring out across the gravestones. "Finding God again. Prayin' harder. Tryin' to be a good boy. I do it, I swear I do, but… somethin' just feels off in me. Wrong."

She let him spill it, let him wrestle with the words, and when she finally spoke, it wasn't with the rehearsed lines of a sermon. "I can't tell you how to fix everything," she said quietly. "I'm not a priest. I'm just me. But I don't think you're broken, Bucky."

He gave a sharp, bitter laugh. "Feels like it though."

For a moment, silence. The bells up front clanged faintly, signaling that Mass would soon begin. Dot tucked a curl of red hair behind her ear and studied him with those steady eyes.

"You're in love with Steve," Dot spoke lightly, like she was commenting on the weather or the state of the floor.

Bucky scoffed immediately, too fast, too sharp. He shook his head with a laugh that sounded practiced. "What? No. Don't be ridiculous."

He didn't look at her when he said it.

Dot didn't push. She just smiled. Small, knowing. "You're not as subtle as you think."

Bucky shifted, rubbing at the back of his neck. "You're lookin' way too

close," he muttered. "You always do that. Readin' into things."

"Maybe," she said gently. "Or maybe I've been paying attention. For a while now."

That made him glance at her, something tired and exposed slipping through before he could stop it. He exhaled slowly, shoulders sagging just a fraction.

"…You're not gonna tell anyone," he said, not quite a question.

Dot shook her head without hesitation. "No. I won't." She met his eyes, steady and sincere. "It's not my story to tell."

Bucky let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. He nodded once, quiet. Meanwhile, he searched her face for even a flicker of disgust, of judgment, but there was none. Just calm kindness.

"You know," she added after a moment, "I think love is love. Doesn't matter who it's for. You are the way God made you, Buck. Perfect in His eyes, even if it doesn't feel that way in yours."

Bucky swallowed hard, shoulders trembling. His chest ached so fiercely it was like her words had cracked something open inside him. He pressed the heel of his hand against his brow, trying to hold it together.

Dot just sat there with him, silent, present. No preaching, no pity. Just a girl who noticed, who cared.

Dot's hand, light and steady, rubbed slow circles between Bucky's shoulder blades. The sound of chatter and bells inside the church was muffled here in the yard, as if they were in a bubble apart from everyone else.

"What happened between you and Steve?" she asked softly.

Bucky's first instinct was to clam up. His jaw locked, his eyes fixed on a crooked gravestone across the grass. "It's… nothing. Don't worry about it."

Dot tilted her head. "Buck, you said you fought with him. You look like you haven't slept in days. That doesn't sound like nothing."

He huffed out a humorless laugh. "You wouldn't get it. Girls… they like to talk. To gossip. I ain't gonna hand you something you can

whisper about with your friends."

Her hand paused on his back, then pressed firmly, grounding. "I'm not like that. I promise you, I won't tell a soul."

He darted her a skeptical glance, but her gaze was steady, clear as glass.

"Not even Peggy?" he muttered, bitterness curling in his tone.

Dot blinked, then lowered her voice further. "Especially not Peggy."

Something in him cracked. It wasn't much, but it was enough. He exhaled shakily, hands wringing in his lap. "Steve… he went on a date. With her." The words were sour on his tongue.

Dot's brows lifted, but she didn't interrupt.

"He insisted that he didn't know it was a date," Bucky went on quickly, defending Steve even as his own chest twisted. "He's… he's Steve. He don't get things like that right away. But it still felt like- like betrayal. We had rules. Rules we set for each other. And then he just-" His voice caught, teeth gritted.

Dot's expression softened with realization. "Peggy told me about that," she admitted.

Bucky's head snapped toward her, sharp and wary. "She told you?"

Honestly, Bucky should have expected that. He said it himself, girls like to gossip. Bucky wasn't even sure why he told Dot all this, but it felt oddly good to have someone listen.

"She tells me everything," Dot explained gently, holding her palms up as if to show she meant no harm. "We're best friends, Buck. When she likes someone, she talks to me about it. And she… she does like Steve."

The words hit like a stone to his gut. He looked away, staring at the gravel by their feet. "Figures."

"But," Dot continued carefully, "Peggy isn't the type to just fall for any boy who smiles at her. She's not looking for one of those loud, cocky American types. She likes that Steve is… different. Quieter. Kind."

Bucky's lip curled faintly, though not in anger, more like he was fighting something tight inside. "Yeah. That's him."

Dot hesitated, just a fraction, like she was deciding how much to say. Then she sighed. “I know about Peggy. About the date.”

Bucky’s shoulders stiffened immediately. He didn’t look at her, just stared ahead like the street had suddenly become very interesting. “Yeah?” he said, voice too casual. “Go on.”

Dot glanced at him sideways. “Why?”

He swallowed. “Just- keep talkin’.” A beat. “I wanna know if what Steve told me lines up. If he left anything out.”

Dot didn’t miss the implication. She nodded slowly. “She called me after. Right away. Said she invited him over to draw. They were in her room.”

Bucky’s jaw tightened. His hands curled into fists at his sides. “And?”

“She tried to kiss him,” Dot said, carefully watching his face now.

Something sharp twisted in his chest. He sucked in a breath through his teeth. “And?” he pressed again, quieter this time, like he was bracing for impact.

“And Steve pulled back,” Dot finished. “Immediately.”

Bucky’s eyes flicked to hers, fast and searching, like he was looking for the catch. “You’re sure.”

Dot nodded. “She wasn’t even mad. Just… confused. Said he looked panicked more than anything. Shy. Red as a beet. Peggy thought it was because he’d never been with a girl before. But now…” She tilted her head, meeting Bucky’s watery gaze. “Now I think it’s because of you.”

Silence stretched between them.

Bucky let out a shaky laugh that didn’t sound like laughter at all. “So he didn’t lie,” he muttered. More to himself than to her.

Dot tilted her head. “Sounds like he didn’t.”

That should’ve made him feel better. It didn’t.

Instead, the knot in his chest tightened, twisting into something uglier. Something that felt like guilt mixed with bitterness. He dragged a hand down his face, frustration bleeding through. “Then what the hell

am I even mad about?"

Dot stayed quiet, letting him talk.

"I mean-" he went on, voice roughening, "I don't get to act like some betrayed husband, right? I don't own him. I don't get to-" He stopped, jaw clenching. "Christ."

He laughed again, sharper this time. "Maybe I'm just pissed because everything went wrong the second I got close to him." He shook his head. "I was fine before. Or at least normal. Girls made sense. Or they were supposed to."

Dot frowned slightly. "Bucky-"

"No," he cut in, too quick. "Think about it. Before Steve, I didn't question anything. Didn't lie awake wonderin' why my body didn't work right. Didn't feel like I was missin' somethin' everyone else had." His voice dropped. "Then with Steve, and suddenly I can't even pretend anymore."

That admission hung heavy between them.

"So yeah," he finished quietly. "Maybe I don't get to be mad at him. But I'm still miserable. And he's the only difference."

Dot didn't argue with him. She just watched him, eyes soft but steady, like she understood something Bucky wasn't ready to say out loud yet.

"Being miserable doesn't make you wrong," she said finally. "It just means you're hurting."

Bucky swallowed hard, looking away again.

"Doesn't feel like there's a difference," he muttered.

The air between them went still. Bucky's throat closed, his breath shallow. His heart hammered so hard it hurt.

Dot didn't rush him. She just let it settle, her words like stones dropped in still water, rippling outward.

"You're the reason he pulled away," she whispered again, trying to steer the conversation into a nicer direction. "You're the reason he doesn't look at other girls the way he looks at you."

Bucky bit the inside of his cheek, trying and failing to hold himself

together. His eyes shimmered, his lashes wet. He finally rasped, barely audible, “You’re not gonna tell anyone, right?”

Dot reached across, taking his trembling hand in both of hers. “No, Bucky. Never.”

She squeezed, her own eyes bright but steady. “I told you. You’re not broken. You’re just… in love. That’s not a sin. That’s not something wrong.”

For the first time in days, Bucky let himself believe it, even if only for a heartbeat.

The bell in the steeple began to toll, low and steady, calling the congregation inside. Dot gave Bucky’s hand one last squeeze before letting go, her expression kind and quiet, as if to say you’re not alone. He nodded faintly, wiped the heel of his palm against his damp eyes, and followed her back through the heavy wooden doors.

The church smelled of wax and incense, the air thick with perfume from the older women who’d powdered themselves before coming. Stained-glass windows filtered the autumn light into fractured colors, painting the pews in reds and blues. Bucky slid into the long row where his family sat. His father was already stiff-backed at the aisle end, his mother folding her hands piously, Rebecca whispering with a friend further down.

Dot slipped in two rows ahead, sitting primly beside her mother. She glanced back once, caught Bucky’s eye, and offered the smallest, encouraging smile before facing forward.

The organ swelled, a slow hymn beginning. People rose together, the old wood groaning beneath their shifting weight. Bucky stood because he had to, murmured because his mother’s elbow pressed into his ribs, but his mind wasn’t on the words.

It was on Steve.

Steve’s awkward smile when he tried to solve an algebra problem. The way Steve’s hands shook when he tied his shoes. The quiet comfort of falling asleep pressed shoulder to shoulder in that narrow bed.

Dot’s words replayed over and over. *You’re the reason he pulled away.*

He wanted to believe it. God, he wanted to. But the bruise on his cheek still ached, his father’s voice still rattled in his bones, and

Peggy's face hovered there too, soft and pretty, asking Steve for something that should've been his.

The priest's voice rose at the altar, deep and commanding, reading from scripture about temptation, about straying from the path of righteousness. Bucky shifted on his feet, his palms damp, guilt crawling under his skin like ants. His mother's phrase, *find your way back to God*, echoed in his head, sharper now in this place, surrounded by bowed heads and folded hands.

What if she's right?

What if Dot's wrong? What if there is something broken in him?

He sat when everyone sat, knelt when everyone knelt, but his eyes were fixed on the candlelight dancing at the altar. Each flicker seemed to whisper Steve's name.

Could he forgive him?

Steve hadn't lied out of malice. He wasn't like that. He was just clumsy with people, soft-hearted, and too trusting. Maybe he really hadn't realized Peggy wanted more. Maybe he'd just wanted to be polite, to say yes when someone asked for his time.

Bucky chewed the inside of his cheek raw, his knee bouncing under the pew. He remembered the look on Steve's face when he'd confessed, the guilt that had twisted his features. That wasn't the face of someone who wanted Peggy. That was the face of someone terrified of losing him.

But still Steve had lied. Just like Bucky used to. Sneaking, hiding, pretending. The sting of betrayal still lingered, sharp as the crack of his father's hand across his jaw.

Forgive him? He wanted to. More than anything, he wanted to fold back into that warmth, that easy laughter, the quiet promise that he wasn't alone in the world. But if he forgave too quickly, what stopped Steve from doing it again? What stopped Peggy from trying again?

What stopped Steve from choosing Peggy over him?

She meant less trouble, more normalcy, less hiding. Sarah Rogers would love her. Peggy was a better choice. Honestly, Bucky would understand Steve if he chose Peggy over him. Maybe he'd do the same if a nice girl with a pretty face took a liking to him. In the real him.

The hymn ended. Everyone sat, heads bowed for the homily. The priest spoke about trust, about building a foundation on truth. Bucky's throat tightened. He pressed his knuckles against his mouth, fighting the sting in his eyes.

He didn't want to cry here, in front of his father, in front of the whole damn church. He swallowed hard and forced himself still.

Dot glanced back again, just for a second, her gaze catching his. She didn't smile this time. She just nodded, a small, certain gesture.

Bucky closed his eyes. In the dark behind his lids, it was Steve's face he saw.

Maybe he could forgive. Not today, not yet. The wound was still too raw. But maybe.

And that tiny maybe was the only prayer he could manage.

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

Monday, May 8th, 1940 - 44 days left

Monday mornings at Brooklyn High were always a groggy mess of squeaking shoes on linoleum, half-awake chatter, and the scrape of chairs as students shuffled into their first classes. But when Bucky Barnes appeared in the doorway that morning, the atmosphere seemed to shift.

He knocked once, almost timidly, before pushing the heavy wooden door open. Mr. Klein, their weary algebra teacher, looked up from his attendance sheet.

“You’re late, Barnes.”

Bucky’s head dipped, eyes low. His voice was rough, hardly more than a mumble. “Sorry, sir.”

And that was it. No charming grin, no quick excuse, none of the easy confidence he usually leaned on to smooth things over. He just trudged in, shoulders slumped, his books hugged close against his chest like a shield. His dark hair was combed back unevenly, evidence of his mother’s hands that morning, but strands still stuck out at odd angles. There were faint shadows under his eyes, bruised purple and gray, the kind only long nights of tossing and turning could carve into someone’s face. His lips looked chapped, pale.

The usual girls who sometimes watched him walk in didn’t whisper this time. They just looked uneasy, as if something in him told them to leave him alone.

Bucky slid into his seat beside Steve with a heaviness that made the chair groan. He didn’t even glance at him, just pulled his notebook from his satchel, set his pencil down, and sat there.

Steve had been watching from the moment Bucky stepped through the door. He couldn’t help it. His gut tightened the way it always did when Bucky wasn’t right. Steve had seen him scraped and bloodied before, drunk and stumbling, bruised from scraps in the street. But this… this was different. This was inside.

“Buck?” Steve’s voice was soft, meant only for him, careful not to draw attention.

Bucky didn't move at first, staring blankly at the grain of the desk, his pencil rolling slowly beneath his fingers. Finally, he blinked and tilted his head just slightly, as if it took all the energy he had just to acknowledge Steve.

"You alright? You don't look so good."

The corner of Bucky's mouth twitched, but it wasn't a smile. He sighed through his nose, low and tired, before answering in that same mumble from earlier. "I don't feel like talking, Stevie."

Steve's chest squeezed. He leaned in a little, whispering gently, "Okay. That's fine. You don't have to."

Bucky rubbed his thumb over the edge of his notebook, slow circles, restless. His shoulders rose and fell in a weary shrug. He looked like he might close himself off completely, but after a beat, he muttered, "I just… I need some space. A little time. To get over what happened."

Steve's breath caught, but he nodded quickly, not wanting to push. His voice was steady, calm, though his heart was racing. "Yeah. I understand. Take the time you need."

For a long moment, Bucky said nothing else. His jaw was tight, his profile pale and drawn. The morning light from the window made the bruise on his cheekbone faintly visible again, not fresh but not faded either.

Finally, he added, quieter, almost lost under the scratching of pencils around them. "I'm not mad anymore."

Steve blinked. Relief flickered in his chest, but it was tangled with guilt and sorrow. He wanted to reach out, put a hand on Bucky's arm, squeeze his shoulder, anything. But the way Bucky sat, so tense, folded in on himself, as if touch might shatter him, made Steve hold back.

Instead, Steve gave the smallest nod, his voice hushed. "Thank you for telling me."

Bucky shifted in his seat, leaning his chin against his hand as if the weight of his head was too much. He didn't look at Steve, but his words, short, clipped as they were, felt like a fragile branch, a crack in the wall he'd put up.

And Steve would wait. However long Bucky needed, he'd wait.

Mr. Klein's chalk squeaked against the board, launching into equations that most of the class would spend the hour trying not to doze through. But Steve barely heard any of it. His eyes kept flicking to the boy beside him, the slump of his posture, the way his lashes fluttered like he was fighting sleep, the pale press of his lips.

He wasn't mad. That should've made everything feel lighter. But the look on Bucky's face told Steve it wasn't that simple.

—

The lunch bell clanged, and the classroom came alive with scraping chairs, chatter, and the slap of books shoved back into bags. Steve took his time, gathering his things neatly and giving Bucky space like he'd promised.

Usually, they would walk out together, shoulders bumping, sometimes teasing each other about how terribly lame the math lesson was. Today, Steve lingered just enough that Bucky was already ahead, already swallowed by the stream of kids spilling into the hallway.

By the time Steve made it to the yard, he could see the usual table. Joey was talking animatedly with his hands, and Charlie was cutting him off all the time with comments. Richie was trying to get a laugh out of Mickey, and Bucky was wedged between them, chewing slowly on a sandwich like it was the hardest task in the world.

His shoulders were stiff, his gaze distant. The others noticed, of course, they did, and tried to include him in the chatter. A nudge here, a joke there. But Bucky only gave them half-smiles that didn't reach his eyes.

Steve didn't approach. Not today. Instead, he slipped away, pushing through the crowds of students.

He found his spot along the brick wall at the edge of the schoolyard, perched himself there, and pulled his sketchbook from his satchel. His pencil hovered over the page for a long while before he began sketching the cafeteria window he could see from across the yard, his strokes quick and tentative. He wasn't drawing the building so much as the figures he saw, the familiar outlines of his friends, the little gang Steve was so used to having around him, clustered around their table.

He didn't really miss them. Not exactly. He liked Joey well enough, and Richie or Mickey could be fun on a good day. Charlie too, in his

own way. But without Bucky there, Steve was never quite folded into the group, and for a long time, that had been fine. As long as he had Bucky, the rest didn't matter.

Now, though, the absence felt heavier. He missed the noise, the easy laughter, the sense of belonging that came from sitting at a crowded table instead of on the edge of things. Still, even that wasn't the whole truth.

What he missed really was Bucky himself.

Steve's pencil worked quickly, shading in the slouch of Bucky's shoulders, the hollowness of his posture. He chewed on his bottom lip, guilt prickling. Giving Bucky space was the right thing to do, but watching him like this from a distance made Steve feel helpless.

He was so lost in the lines that he didn't notice the footsteps until a shadow fell over the page.

"Sketching again?"

Steve startled, looking up. Peggy Carter stood there with her books hugged to her chest, her dark hair pinned neatly back. Dot lingered just behind her, a gentler presence, her ginger hair catching the light like a halo.

Steve blinked, trying to shift his sketchbook closed without making it obvious. "Uh- yeah. Just passing the time."

Peggy tilted her head, sharp-eyed as always. "Mind if we join you? Dot and I couldn't stand another minute of Evie's endless chatter. She's into this new guy."

Dot gave a small smile, rolling her eyes lightly as if to confirm. "She never stops. Thought we'd save ourselves the headache."

Steve hesitated, then gestured to the wall beside him. "Sure. Don't see why not."

The girls climbed up beside him, balancing their lunches on their laps. Peggy unwrapped an apple and took a crisp bite, while Dot smoothed her skirt and set her book bag down.

For a moment, they sat in silence, the noise of the courtyard filling the gap. Steve fiddled with his pencil, tapping it against the sketchbook that lay half-shut on his knee.

Peggy broke the quiet. “You looked deep in thought. Something on your mind?”

Steve gave a half-smile, awkward. “Always is. Sketching helps me think.”

Peggy smirked, amused by his modesty. “You’re quite the mystery, Steve Rogers. Always scribbling, always lost in thought. What were you drawing this time?”

Steve hesitated, his eyes flicking toward the cafeteria window before quickly pulling back. “Just… people. Nothing special.”

Dot glanced at him, her expression calm, kind, knowing. But she didn’t press. She didn’t even let her gaze flick toward the cafeteria where Bucky sat. She kept her word. Not a hint betrayed that she’d spoken to Bucky the day before, or that she’d already pieced things together.

Instead, she leaned forward slightly, her voice gentle. “Sometimes it helps, putting things down on paper. Even if it’s not perfect.”

Steve nodded, grateful for her subtle understanding, though she hadn’t said a word to expose what she knew.

Peggy, oblivious, continued chewing on her apple, her sharp eyes narrowing playfully at him. “So what’s up then? You look like you’re carrying the weight of the world.”

Steve chuckled lightly, though there wasn’t much humor in it. “Maybe I am.” He quickly changed the subject, asking, “So how’re classes treating you two?”

Peggy launched into a small rant about American history lessons being “utterly insufferable” when you’d grown up in England, and Dot chimed in with little comments here and there, smoothing the edges of Peggy’s sharp wit with her own quiet humor.

Steve listened, grateful for the distraction and company, though his gaze kept drifting back toward the table. Back toward Bucky, sitting there, trying to laugh but not quite managing.

He tapped his pencil against his knee, sketchbook closed tight now, the weight of unspoken words heavy in his chest.

—

The Rogers apartment smelled faintly of boiled potatoes and cabbage, dinner from earlier still lingering in the air. The small kitchen was crowded with the sound of water rushing into the sink, the soft clink of ceramic plates against the counter, and the distant hum of a radio drifting in from a neighbor's open window.

Sarah Rogers stood at the sink, sleeves rolled to her elbows, her hair pinned back in the same practical twist she wore at the hospital. The pale yellow light above the stove cast a warm glow over her tired but steady face. She hummed faintly under her breath as she scrubbed, her thin frame moving with quiet rhythm.

Steve stood beside her, dish towel in hand, drying the dishes she passed along. He was tall enough now that he didn't have to stand on a crate like when he was little, but the scene was nearly the same as it had been for years. The two of them, shoulder to shoulder in their tiny kitchen, working together.

"Careful with that plate," Sarah said gently, nodding toward the one slipping in his damp hands.

"I got it," Steve murmured, tightening his grip. He stacked it neatly with the others, but his hands fidgeted even after he'd set the towel down on the counter. His chest felt tight. He'd been holding the words in all day, but here, here he could let them out.

"Mom," he began quietly, staring down at the dish towel he twisted in his hands, "what do I do to make it right with Buck?"

Sarah glanced at him, eyebrows raised slightly. She didn't answer right away, only rinsed another plate and handed it over. Her silence gave him permission to go on.

Steve's voice grew softer. "He said he's not mad anymore, that he just needs time. But I don't know what that means. I don't know how much space to give him, or if I should push… if I should fight for him, or…" His voice faltered. "What if I ruined it for good?"

Sarah turned back to the sink, her face thoughtful. She scrubbed slowly, as if weighing her words. "You care about him," she said finally, matter-of-fact.

"Of course I do," Steve said quickly. His chest hurt with how true it was.

"Then that's the start." Sarah's tone was calm, soothing, like when she

talked to patients at the hospital. “People fight, Stevie. Couples, friends, families. You know I had my share of it with your father.” Her mouth tightened for a moment, remembering. “But what matters isn’t just the fight. It’s what comes after. Do you listen? Do you change when you need to? Do you make room for each other’s hurt?”

Steve swallowed hard. “He… he said all kinds of things. That he changed for me. That he risked everything for me.” His voice cracked. “And I went and broke the rules we made. Even if I didn’t mean to.”

Sarah passed him another dish, her expression gentle now. “You’re seventeen, sweetheart. You’re still figuring yourself out. So is he. Don’t hold yourself to being perfect. Not when it comes to love. Nobody’s perfect at it.”

Steve nodded, staring down at the plate he dried. “So I just… wait?”

“Wait, but not too far away,” Sarah said softly. She reached over and brushed a wet lock of blond hair off his forehead, the way she used to when he was smaller. “Let him know you’re there. Let him see you mean it. Sometimes, Stevie, forgiveness doesn’t come quick. It takes a bit of trust to grow back.”

Her voice lowered, steadier, the way it always did when she spoke about something close to her heart. “And don’t forget to forgive yourself, too. If you can’t do that, you’ll always trip over your own guilt.”

Steve’s throat burned. He set the dish down a little too quickly and rubbed at his eyes with the back of his wrist. “I just… I can’t stand seeing him like this. Like he’s hurting, and I’m the one who made it worse.”

Sarah turned off the tap, dried her hands on a towel, and pulled him gently into her arms. His tall frame folded down toward her, and for a moment, he was a boy again, his face pressed into his mother’s shoulder as her arms wrapped firmly around him.

“You’re not the only thing he’s hurting from,” she murmured into his hair. “Don’t forget that. Life’s been hard on that boy long before you did something. You’re just close enough to be where he lets it spill.”

Steve clung to her, eyes shut tight, breathing in the faint scent of soap and starch that always clung to her clothes.

“You love him?” she asked softly, already knowing the answer.

He nodded against her shoulder, voice rough. “More than anything.”

“Then that’s what you do, Stevie,” Sarah said firmly, drawing back to look him in the eye. “You keep showing him. Even when he pushes you away. Even when it’s messy. Love’s not about never making mistakes. It’s about choosing each other after.”

Steve’s eyes flicked down to the plates he was drying, twisting the towel in his hands. “I just… I want to help him. I want him to forgive me… to not hate me.”

Sarah smiled softly, squeezing his shoulder. “You can’t force someone to forgive you, Stevie. All you can do is show him you care, that you’re there for him, that you’re honest. Give him time. And be patient. He’s hurting in ways that… well, you can’t always fix with a simple apology.”

Steve nodded, absorbing her words, but the tight knot in his stomach didn’t loosen. “I feel like I should do something… say something, or-” He hesitated, voice quiet. “Maybe I should write him a note?”

Sarah shook her head, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Notes are fine, but don’t overthink it. Just… be yourself. The boy knows you better than anyone. And if he said he needs space, then respect that. Show him through small things, not big gestures. Maybe a smile at school, a quiet word, nothing more. Let him come back to you when he’s ready.”

Steve let out a shaky laugh, glancing at his mother. “You make it sound so easy.”

“Easy?” Sarah chuckled, a low, warm sound. “Not at all, Stevie. Nothing with people you care about is ever easy. But you have to try anyway. And you, my boy, are a good one. Don’t forget that. You care about him, and that matters more than anything you could do wrong.”

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

Tuesday, May 9th, 1940 - 43 days left

The room was dim, curtains half-drawn against the bright Brooklyn morning, but Bucky still kept one arm draped over his face as if to block out every last shred of light. His body was heavy, leaden, as though the three nights of broken sleep had settled into his bones. He'd drift for a few minutes, then jolt awake with his heart pounding, haunted by scraps of voices or shapes in the dark. By now, he felt like a ghost himself, hollow-eyed, sluggish, worn thin.

The alarm clock on his nightstand had blared an hour ago, and he'd reached out blindly to smack it off. Now the house was stirring without him. Becca's footsteps downstairs, the creak of a cupboard, the smell of coffee faint from the kitchen. He tried to shut it out.

The door creaked open.

"James," his mother's voice carried in, firm but not unkind. Valeria Barnes stepped into the room, apron already tied over her dress. She always looked so composed in the mornings, her dark hair pinned neatly, the faintest smudge of flour on her sleeve. She paused at the sight of him still curled under the blanket. "You'll be late again."

Bucky groaned and rolled onto his side, barely prying one eye open. "Ma… please. I can't. Just… let me stay home. Just today." His voice was hoarse, broken by exhaustion.

Valeria moved briskly to the bed, tugging at the corner of the blanket like she might peel him out. But when she got a better look at his pale face, the shadows beneath his eyes, she slowed. Her hand lingered on his shoulder. "James, you cannot go on like this. Three mornings now. You're slipping."

"I'm so tired," Bucky whispered, his throat tight with the admission. He hated sounding weak, but it was the truth. "I can't keep my eyes open. Please, Ma. I won't cause trouble, I swear. I just… I just need to sleep."

Valeria's sternness wavered. She stood for a moment, lips pressed thin, the way she always did when her heart and her rules fought with each other. Then, with a sigh, she sat down on the edge of his bed and smoothed the hair back from his damp forehead. "All right," she

murmured at last. “Stay. But only today.”

Relief washed over him, and his eyes fluttered shut.

Her fingers brushed his temple, lingering there. “You must not tell your father. He would not approve. He thinks a man never falters. But you are still only seventeen.” She shook her head, voice dropping. “He forgets.”

Bucky nodded faintly into the pillow. He knew what it meant. Silence, as always.

Valeria rose, fussing now, straightening the clutter on his nightstand. Her hand paused at the worn leather cover of the Bible, tucked half-hidden on the shelf. She picked it up and brushed dust from it with her palm, her expression softening. Setting it gently beside his clock, she looked down at him.

“A fight with your friend should not turn you into such a mess, James,” she said quietly, almost more to herself. “God gives us strength to carry our burdens, not to be swallowed by them.”

He wanted to tell her it wasn’t that simple, that it wasn’t just “a fight with his friend.” But his chest was heavy, his throat too thick with sleep. He only sighed, burying his face deeper.

Valeria sat back down, the Bible in her lap. She opened it, flipping until she found a passage. “Come, James. A few words before you rest. It will steady your spirit.”

He groaned again, but when she pressed his hand, he forced his eyes open. She began to pray softly, in her careful accented English, the same verses she’d made him recite as a child. Bucky mumbled along, words blurred and slurred but recognizable. His eyelids sagged even as he spoke.

Her voice stayed steady, rising and falling in a gentle rhythm. When they finished, she set the Bible back on the nightstand. She leaned down and kissed the top of his head, the way she hadn’t done since he was little. “Sleep, James. God willing, you will wake with new strength.”

Bucky let out a small, broken hum of acknowledgment.

Valeria pulled the blanket higher over his shoulder, tucking him in with surprising tenderness. Then she stood, smoothing her apron once

more. “I will call the school. And then I must take Becca.” She lingered in the doorway, watching her son’s form curl smaller beneath the blanket. For a moment, her stern mask slipped, and her eyes filled with worry.

Then she turned and left, her footsteps fading down the hall.

Bucky exhaled shakily, half-asleep already. The Bible sat beside him, the faint warmth of his mother’s kiss still on his hair, the sound of her prayers echoing in his ears as he finally drifted into something deeper than the restless dozing of the nights before.

—

The classroom buzzed faintly with the low scratch of pencils, the teacher’s monotone droning on about the reading assignment. Steve sat hunched at his desk, his notebook open but ignored, the corner already filled with absentminded doodles. The faint outlines of buildings, crooked fire escapes, the curve of a lamppost. His pencil tapped nervously against the margin.

He kept glancing sideways, at the empty chair beside him. Bucky’s chair.

Twenty-five minutes into class, and it was still vacant, desk untouched, the usual scuffed leather satchel nowhere to be seen. Steve tried to tell himself it was fine, that Buck had probably just overslept again. He did that sometimes. But his chest ached at the sight of the space where his best friend usually sat sprawled, legs too long for the desk, chewing on a pencil and pretending he wasn’t watching Steve scribble in his notebook.

Steve sighed quietly and shifted, pressing his palm over the page as if to steady himself. He wanted Bucky here. Not to talk, Bucky had said he needed space, and Steve meant to respect that, but just to exist next to him. That small comfort of shared silence, the subtle sideways glances that said more than words ever could.

The clock ticked above the chalkboard, every second stretching longer. Steve’s stomach twisted with guilt. If Bucky wasn’t in class, maybe it was his fault. Maybe the fight had torn him up worse than he’d let on.

Steve bit his lip and, without fully realizing it, began to write. In the corner of the notebook, beneath the half-drawn lamppost, his pencil scratched out words. A letter. Nothing too fancy, he wasn’t good with

words out loud, and on paper wasn't much better. But at least it was something.

Buck,
I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I want us to talk, just us.
Maybe Friday, we could go dancing? Just the two of us.
We could use the music, and maybe we'll figure it out.
I don't want to lose you.
-Steve

He read it twice, cringing at the simplicity of it, then carefully tore the page out and folded it small. He tucked it into his satchel, making sure he couldn't lose it.

The bell rang, startling him. The scrape of chairs filled the room, kids chattering as they spilled into the hall. Steve lingered, eyes darting to Bucky's desk one last time. Empty still. His throat tightened.

Gathering his books, he slipped out, scanning the hall as though Bucky might suddenly appear around the corner. No luck. Instead, Peggy and Dot appeared together, shoulder to shoulder, chatting with their books clutched to their chests.

Steve hesitated, then made himself step toward them. "Hey," he called, a little breathless. "You two headed to the cafeteria?"

Both girls looked up, surprised but smiling.

"Sure," Peggy said warmly, shifting her books. "Join us?"

"Of course. You should join us," Dot added, her gentle eyes studying him a little more carefully, though she didn't say anything more.

Steve gave a small, defeated sigh and nodded. "Yeah. Let's go."

As they walked, Steve's heart tugged toward the absence beside him. The way it should've been filled with Bucky, shoving him lightly with an elbow, cracking jokes, or just trailing close enough that Steve never felt alone. But he told himself maybe this was good. Maybe a day off would do Bucky some good. Let him rest.

Still, as he listened half-heartedly to Peggy and Dot's chatter. He made up his mind. After school, he'd stop by Bucky's place. Just to drop the note in. No knocking, no pestering. Just a gesture, a reminder that he still cared, still wanted to make it right.

—

The afternoon sun had shifted by the time Valeria's heels clicked across the floorboards. Bucky had been drifting in and out of shallow sleep all day, never truly resting. The kind where you hear everything still. Distant cars, the kids playing in the street, Becca's voice hollering downstairs before leaving for some errand. He lay half-curled in bed, staring at the ceiling with bloodshot eyes, when his mother appeared in the doorway.

"James," she said softly, the way she always did when she wasn't angry. She carried something folded in her hand. "There was a note in the mailbox for you."

His brows furrowed, slow and confused. "For me?" His voice was hoarse.

She nodded, came further into the room, and laid the slip of paper on his nightstand next to the Bible she'd smoothed with her hand that morning. He hadn't touched it. Her movements were brisk, practical, but she lingered a second, her palm smoothing the corner of his blanket as if she were tempted to tuck him in again. "Read it. Might do you some good." Then she left, shutting the door behind her.

Bucky blinked at the folded paper. For a moment, he just stared, chest tightening with something he couldn't name. He didn't move. His first thought was that it was probably from school. A teacher, or maybe a note from Becca's friend shoved into the wrong place. But no. Something in him already knew.

Slowly, he dragged himself upright, his hair falling into his eyes, and reached for it. The paper was folded neatly, the edges sharp from careful hands. He recognized Steve's handwriting the moment he unfolded it.

Buck,
I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I want us to talk, just us.
Maybe Friday, we could go dancing? Just the two of us.
We could use the music, and maybe we'll figure it out.
I don't want to lose you.
-Steve

His throat closed around the words. He read them once, twice, then again, eyes tracing the handwriting he knew so well. The way Steve's letters leaned, how the ink sometimes stuttered where his hand had trembled.

Bucky slumped back into the pillows, the letter limp in his hand. His chest ached, not with anger this time but with exhaustion, with that deep, gnawing ache of wanting something so badly and not knowing if he could still have it.

Dancing. Just the two of them. He thought of the music halls, of Steve's small frame swaying awkwardly beside him, always insisting he couldn't dance but letting Bucky tug him through it anyway. He thought of Saturday night, of how everything had shattered with a few sharp words and truths neither of them had meant to spill.

Bucky pressed the note against his chest and stared at the ceiling.

Should he forgive him? The question had gnawed at him since Dot had sat with him outside church, since she'd said with her soft certainty that love wasn't a sin, that maybe God had made him this way on purpose. But then his father's voice echoed too. Be a man, don't be weak, you'll never get anywhere like this. And the bruises that were almost faded but not forgotten.

He wanted to forgive Steve. God, he wanted to. But he was so tired, so unsure.

He turned onto his side, pulling the blanket up to his chin, the letter still clutched in his hand. His lashes burned as he blinked hard. He thought of Steve's blue eyes, too soft for this world.

Bucky whispered into the quiet, almost like a prayer, "Me neither."

But he still didn't know if he had the strength to climb out of this hole and meet Steve halfway.

He folded the letter carefully, smoothing the crease with his thumb, and slid it under his pillow. Then he lay still, eyes open in the dimming light, mind racing in circles as his body begged for rest that wouldn't come.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Wednesday, May 10th, 1940 - 42 days left

The cafeteria hummed with its usual noise, metal lunch trays clattering, kids laughing too loudly, chairs scraping the floor. Steve hovered just inside the doorway leading outside, eyes darting across the crowded room. His stomach knotted the same way it always did before a fight, only this wasn't a fight with fists. This was harder.

He spotted Bucky easily. The boy slouched at the usual table with Joey, Richie, and the others. His hair was neat enough, his mother's hand probably smoothing it down that morning, but his eyes looked hollow. Bucky wasn't laughing, wasn't leaning back with that confident smirk. He was just chewing on a sandwich like it might turn to dust in his mouth, staring through the chatter around him.

Steve swallowed and gathered every scrap of courage he had. He shuffled over and cleared his throat softly.

"Hey, Buck," he said, voice almost swallowed by the chaos around the table. "Uh- can we talk?"

Bucky blinked up at him, weary blue eyes heavy-lidded. For a second, Steve thought he'd be brushed off, but then Bucky set his sandwich down and sighed. "Yeah. Sure."

Steve's heart kicked. He nodded quickly, relief washing over him, and gestured with his head toward the corner near the windows where it was quieter. They both rose, ignoring the glances from their friends, and drifted away from the table.

They stopped by the glass panes streaked with sun, and Steve toyed with his satchel just so he had something to do with his hands. He glanced up shyly, then down at his shoes.

"Uh… did you… did you get my note?"

Bucky shoved his hands in his pockets, eyes flickering away. "Yeah. I got it." He paused, lips pressing into a thin line. "Look, Steve… it's real nice that you wrote it, but I'm not sure. Not sure I'm ready."

Steve's chest squeezed. He nodded, biting back the urge to defend himself too quickly. Instead, he stepped closer, voice soft and steady.

“I get it. I know you’re not doin’ well right now, Buck. I can see it. You’ve been carrying way too much. And I’m sorry- really sorry, I pushed you over the edge. I should’ve been better for you.”

Bucky’s jaw tightened, the words sinking in even if he didn’t want to show it.

Steve leaned in just a fraction, lowering his voice to a whisper so no one could overhear. “But I swear to you- I never kissed her. I pulled back. I didn’t want that. Not with her. Not when… not when it’s you.”

Something flickered in Bucky’s eyes, sharp and pained. He thought of Dot’s voice in his ear, *You’re in love with Steve, right?* He thought of her telling him Peggy had called the very same night, confused over Steve’s awkwardness. How he hadn’t kissed her, how he’d gone shy instead. And here was Steve, confirming it himself.

“Dot told me…” Bucky muttered, almost reluctant. “She said the same. That Peggy said you didn’t.”

Steve blinked, startled. “She did?”

Bucky nodded faintly. He rubbed at the back of his neck, shoulders hunched. “So, yeah. I’ll… I’ll come. Friday. The dance.”

For a moment, Steve just stared at him, as if he’d misheard. Then the biggest, boyish grin split across his face. His eyes lit up, all the worry melting away in an instant. “Really? Buck- that’s- oh my God, that’s great! I’m so glad. We’ll just- just go like old times. Just the two of us. No girls, no crowd. Just us.”

A small, crooked smile tugged at Bucky’s mouth, brief but real. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Steve beamed, his hands twitching like he wanted to grab Bucky’s shoulders and shake him with joy. Instead, he bit back the impulse and just grinned at him until his cheeks hurt.

And then, softer, Bucky added, “You can join me at lunch again, y’know. I said I wanted space. But… I miss havin’ you around.”

Steve’s throat tightened at the quiet confession. He swallowed hard, warmth flooding him from head to toe. “I miss you too, Buck.”

—

The late afternoon sun slanted across the narrow Brooklyn streets, washing the brick row houses in honey light. The neighborhood smelled faintly of coal smoke and laundry soap, somebody's supper already simmering with garlic and onions. Bucky walked slowly, hands jammed in his pockets, hair still mussed despite his mother's efforts that morning. His feet dragged as if every step weighed double, but he couldn't just stay home.

He needed… he didn't even know what.

His eyes drifted to a familiar porch a couple of houses down. Dorothy Miller's family's house. Dot. She had been in his neighbourhood since childhood. Shy in school, polite in church, always more watcher than talker. Not the kind of girl who teased or caused drama. Maybe that was why, after days of feeling like the world was pressing in, Bucky found his feet leading him to her door.

He hesitated, then pressed the bell.

The door opened to reveal a lanky teenager. Dot's older brother, redheaded like her but taller, with freckles and a smudge of ink on his hand from his apprenticeship. His brows went up. "James? James from church?"

Bucky shifted awkwardly. No one called him James outside his parents and a handful of teachers. "Uh- yeah. Hi. Is Dot home?"

"Dorothy," the brother called back over his shoulder, voice teasing. Then, to Bucky, "Hang on." He disappeared inside.

A moment later, Dot appeared, smoothing her skirt, her pale ginger hair catching the sun like fire. Her face brightened faintly when she saw him. "Oh. Bucky."

"Hey." He rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly unsure. "You wanna… maybe take a walk?"

Her brows knit gently, but she didn't hesitate. "Sure. Let me grab my shoes."

—

They set off side by side down the block, the neighborhood alive with kids playing stickball and mothers gossiping from porches. The further they walked, the quieter it got, until they wound up on a shaded street lined with trees, the noise of home fading.

Bucky shoved his hands deeper into his pockets. His voice came rough, unsteady. “I don’t really… I mean, I ain’t got anyone to talk to, Dot. Not about this.”

She glanced at him sideways, soft but steady. “Then talk. I’ll listen.”

And he did. Words spilled clumsily and bitterly, like water from a cracked bucket. He told her Steve had asked him to the dance, that he wasn’t sure he should go. He admitted he missed Steve like hell, but everything inside him was twisted up.

“It’s like- I can’t stop thinkin’ about it, y’know? The way he lied, the whole thing with Peggy. And yeah, maybe it wasn’t what I thought, maybe he didn’t even kiss her, but still-” He trailed off, jaw tight. “Still feels like the universe is laughin’ at me.”

Dot listened, nodding gently, her eyes fixed on him rather than the cracked sidewalk. She let him rant, let him turn circles around his own hurt.

When he finally ran out of steam, she sighed, the sound more kind than scolding. “Bucky. You’re hurting. I see that. But you can’t blame Steve for all of it. He didn’t make your family treat you like they do. He didn’t put those thoughts in your head. He made a mistake, maybe. But not the kind you’re punishing him for.”

Bucky stopped, frowning at her, defensive bubbling up. “He lied to me. He went with Peggy. That was enough.”

Dot shook her head, ginger curls catching the fading light. “I know Peggy. She told me everything. She likes him, sure, but she said he pulled away. He didn’t want her kiss. He wanted…” She paused, eyes soft. “Well. He wanted something else.”

Bucky’s chest burned. He looked away, muttering, “She tell you that, huh.”

“Mm-hm.” Dot’s voice was quiet but steady, almost matter-of-fact. “And Bucky, you miss him. You just admitted it. So why twist the knife? Why keep punishing yourself and him?”

He chewed at the inside of his cheek, fighting the sting in his eyes. His head swam with every ugly thought he’d been trying to drown. How nothing in his life seemed to go right, how he never got to have things easy like other kids, how it all felt like it wasn’t fair.

Dot slowed her pace, brushing her hand lightly over his sleeve. “Sometimes, the hardest thing isn’t holding on. It’s letting go. You don’t have to forget it all, but you can forgive him. Give yourself a chance to stop being angry. It’s only hurting you more.”

Bucky let out a shaky laugh, bitter but tired. “You make it sound so easy.”

“I didn’t say easy,” Dot answered softly. “I said possible.”

They reached the corner bench near the churchyard where they had landed at this point, its wrought-iron fence casting shadows across the grass. They sat, the silence between them heavy but not uncomfortable.

Bucky rubbed at his temple, sighing. “I don’t know, Dot. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I should just… let it go. Dance with him Friday and see.”

She tilted her head, the ghost of a smile tugging her lips. “There you go. That wasn’t so hard to say.”

But he shook his head, voice low. “It’s not that easy inside. I can’t just push it aside, y’know?”

Her eyes softened again, but this time her tone sharpened just enough to cut through his gloom. “Then stop carrying it like a badge. You’re allowed to be hurt, but you don’t have to chain yourself to it.”

Bucky looked at her, startled by her bluntness. But then he huffed, almost a laugh. “You’re tougher than you look, Dot.”

She smiled faintly, folding her hands in her lap. “Somebody has to be.”

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

> Okay, so this chapter is heavy. Please mind the content warnings for self-hatred, self-harm, and extreme internalized homophobia.
>
> Also, it might be extremely obvious that this chapter was born during a time when I was not doing great mentally. Turns out the healthiest coping mechanism I had available was putting all of that into a fic and calling it a day. So if you're thinking "wow, this feels a little too emotionally specific," it maybe is (oopsie). Jokes aside, please take care of yourselves while reading. I'm posting the next (much softer) chapter right after this one, so you won't be left sitting in emotional distress waiting for the update
> <3

Thursday, May 11th, 1940 - 41 days left

Bucky's room was dim, the curtains half-drawn, his bed still messy from the morning he'd overslept. He collapsed onto it, a comic book in hand, but he wasn't really reading. His eyes slid over the panels he had read before a dozen times, the action, the bright heroes who always knew what to do and who they were supposed to be. The words blurred, the pictures unable to keep his focus, before he tossed it to the side and ran a hand through his messy locks.

The house was quiet. Becca was off with a friend, his mother clattering pots downstairs, and his father was still at work for a few more hours. He rolled out of bed and locked his door with a practiced movement. A habit. Then he turned on his radio, setting the volume just loud enough to blur the silence. Not music he cared about, just noise, a shield to hide behind. It was what he always did when he and Steve… when things happened he couldn't explain to anyone.

He sat for a long minute at the edge of his bed, chewing his lip. Then he crouched, pulled the small shoebox from underneath. It was pushed all the way to the back, securely tucked away from everyone. His hands shook as he lifted the battered lid. Inside were the secret treasures he'd kept hidden with quiet shame. Magazines with glossy pages, bare-skinned women posed in ways that were supposed to make a boy's heart race. Boys at school had traded them all the time, so getting your hands on some wasn't as hard as one might imagine.

He stared down at them like they might fix something broken in him.

Dragging the box to the closet mirror, he planted himself before his reflection. Tall, shoulders broad, but his eyes were hollow, ringed with the exhaustion of too many sleepless nights. He swallowed hard, tugging his belt loose, his pants sliding down to his ankles. He stood there, bare legs pale in the dim light, forcing himself to look at his dick hanging between his legs as he tugged his boxers off.

This is what you're supposed to want, he told himself.

This is what all the guys in the neighborhood talk about. What your friends brag about. What your father expects. You're seventeen, James. You're supposed to love this.

He grabbed one of the magazines and flipped a page. A woman with dark hair, lips parted, eyes half-lidded. Perfectly round breasts, a bit too big for her proportions, but apparently, this was what a man desired. The kind of picture that made his friends whistle and elbow each other. He tried to summon it, the feeling they described so easily, but it wasn't there. Just a hollow echo where it should be.

Instead, his mind betrayed him, wandering back to the lunch table that afternoon. Steve, hovering shyly, pencil clutched like a lifeline, asked if they could talk. Steve, with his too-big shirt and those soft, careful eyes like he'd been waiting for permission just to breathe near Bucky again.

Bucky squeezed his eyes shut, shaking his head hard. "No," he muttered under the music, under his own breath. "No, not him."

But the thought clung. Steve, the only person who ever saw him past the wall he built up and the jokes. Steve, the one who ruined everything. Because before Steve, before all the kisses, before those times with the radio loud, Bucky could almost pretend. Pretend he was like the others, that the magazines meant something. That one day he'd settle down with a girl like his father always barked about, a good wife, a house, a family.

But Steve had burned through all of that. Steve had made pretending impossible.

His eyes flicked open, catching his own reflection in the mirror. He looked ridiculous, pants down, clutching a magazine he didn't care about, his face twisted with frustration. He hated himself for it, for needing the box at all, for needing to prove something to himself that

wouldn't stick.

"What's wrong with you?" he whispered to the boy in the glass. His voice cracked. "Why can't you just be normal? Why can't you want this?"

He flipped to another page, forcing his gaze to linger. He gaslit himself with whispers.

See? She's beautiful. You like her. Look at her smile, her body. You like this. You do.

Bucky's other hand reached for his cock, his fingers wrapping around the shaft. His breath hitched as he started to rub up and down. His soft blue eyes shifted back to the magazine page as he found a steady rhythm. He can do this, get hard, and jerk off on a random, pretty lady printed on paper. Everyone can.

But the longer he stared, the more off it felt. And somewhere, at the edge of his thoughts, Steve's face popped up anyway. His blue eyes squinting with laughter, the way he blushed when he was embarrassed, the weight of his hand steady on Bucky's shoulder.

Bucky groaned, dropping his dick and running his hands through his hair instead, tugging until his scalp hurt. "He ruined me," he muttered. "Steve ruined me. Made me… made me not even…" His throat closed.

Because that was the truth, he couldn't speak to anyone, not even Dot, not even himself when he was honest. Steve hadn't just ruined things with Peggy. He had ruined the very story Bucky told himself about who he was supposed to be.

Bucky collapsed back onto the floor, the magazine falling to the floor, his chest heaving like he'd run a mile. The radio buzzed with news, but he barely registered the words of the man talking.

He lay there staring at the ceiling, torn between wanting to cry and wanting to tear the whole world down. Tomorrow, he was supposed to show up at that dance with Steve. Pretend it could be normal again. Pretend like he wasn't terrified. Terrified of losing Steve forever, but also terrified of what it meant if he couldn't let go.

Because maybe Steve hadn't just kissed him. Maybe Steve had really made him unlove girls.

A tear slipped down his cheek, and he swiped it away with his sleeve, a heavy sigh dragging out of his chest. For a moment, he just stared at the dim glow of his lights, eyes blurring until the edges dissolved into nothing.

He could do this. He didn't need Steve for everything. He could get hard on his own. Everyone could, right? Maybe if he told himself often enough, it would be true. Charlie always gave himself a pep talk before exams and somehow came out with good grades. This couldn't be all that different. Right?

Bucky got back up in front of the mirror, bare feet cold against the wooden floor, fingers tight around the edge of the magazine he picked up. His reflection looked back at him like a stranger. Hair tousled, eyes teary, lips pressed into a thin line.

He tried again. He needed it to work, to feel something, to prove to himself he was still normal. He rubbed at his shaft, harder now, knuckles white with pressure, his teeth gritting. Nothing. Just dull ache. No spark. No heat. No flicker of the thing he'd been promised he'd feel.

"Come on," he hissed under his breath, voice hoarse. "Come on. You're a guy, you're supposed to-" His hands shook the quicker he rubbed.

With a sob, he wrapped the glossy magazine around his dick like it was some kind of trick, some kind of support that would do what his head couldn't.

Nothing. *Just nothing.*

His face flushed, but not with desire, with humiliation. His chest heaved. "You like girls," he whispered through clenched teeth. "You like them. You do." He rubbed harder, a desperate, mechanical motion, but all it did was sting. The ache sharpened into a burn, a kind of self-inflicted punishment.

"No," he gasped, eyes squeezed shut. "You're not- you're not like that. You're not…"

Steve's face flashed in his mind again. Not the woman from the magazines in his hand, but Steve.

That's all it took. Just like that, heat spread in Bucky's gut, blood rushing south. His cock thickened against his hand.

Bucky's hand froze. The shame came flooding in.

His breath came in ragged bursts now. The magazine slipped from his fingers and fell open on the floor, the woman's smile on the page staring up at him like an accusation.

And then something inside him snapped.

"Goddamn it!" His fist slammed against the mirror. "Goddamn it!" He punched again, harder this time. "Why won't you- why can't you-"

His voice broke into a rough sound, something between a growl and a sob. Without thinking, he drew back and swung at the mirror again. His knuckles struck the glass with a sickening pop. The mirror shattered in a spiderweb of jagged cracks, a sound like breaking ice filling the room. Shards rained down onto the floor, glittering under the dim light.

Pain shot up his arm. He wobbled back, clutching his hand, blood across his knuckles. He fell to his knees among the shards, staring at his distorted reflection in the fractured glass. It stared back in pieces, one eye here, a part of his mouth there.

His chest hitched. The anger was fading, leaving only the sobs. Loud, unguarded, almost childish sobs. He pressed his forehead to his uninjured hand, curling in on himself on the cold floor.

Downstairs, he heard his mother's voice, alarmed.

"James? James, what was that?"

He stayed silent, shaking, knuckles dripping.

"James!" Her footsteps on the stairs. "Open this door right now!" She rattled the handle. "What's going on in there?"

He pushed himself up, pants still half-down. In a daze, he yanked them up, fumbling with the belt, fingers slick with blood. His heart hammered so hard it felt like it would punch out of his chest.

His mother's voice grew sharper. "James, open this door! James Buchanan Barnes, I swear to God-"

With shaking limbs, he tossed the magazine into the battered box before opening his closet door and stuffing it in. His mother couldn't see. The poor woman would suffer a heart attack if she ever came

across the magazines.

After closing the closet door, he crawled across the floor to the door, glass crunching under his knees. His hands trembled as he twisted the lock.

The door flew open. His mother stood there, eyes wide, mouth parted. She took in the scene. The radio blaring, the shattered mirror, the blood on his hands, and all the color drained from her face.

“Oh, sweet Mother of God…” she yelled, rushing in. “James.”

Bucky backed up, his face wet with tears still flowing, his chest heaving. “I- it’s nothing,” he muttered. “I’m fine. I just-”

But the words died in his throat. Because her eyes weren’t angry. They were full of worry. She reached for his injured hand, voice trembling.

“What did you do?” she asked softly. “What’s going on with you, darling?”

And that… that tone was almost worse than her being furious. It made him feel like a child, like he’d been caught not being able to hold himself together. Like she could see all the cracks he was trying to patch over.

He turned his face away, blinking hard. “I just- I messed up. I’m sorry. I’ll clean it up. Don’t-”

But his voice broke again. He slumped back against the wall, sliding down to the floor.

She crouched beside him, her hands light on his shoulders. “James,” she said again, her Romanian accent slipping thicker with worry. “Talk to me. Please.”

The radio buzzed on. He didn’t know what to say. Didn’t know how to explain the storm in his head. The shame, the anger, the ache. So he just sat there on the floor, trembling, while his mother’s hand hovered near his cheek.

Valeria analysed Bucky’s knuckles, red drops staining the floorboards. She didn’t waste time with scolding or questions. She hurried back out of the room, skirts rustling, footsteps echoing down the hall. The bathroom door creaked open, clattered shut again. In a moment, she was back, arms full. The porcelain basin she used for washing small

wounds, a clean rag, and the chipped tin box where she kept rubbing alcohol and bandages.

“Get up,” she commanded, her voice sharper now from panic but not unkind. She shoved aside a few of the larger shards of glass with her slipper and helped him up. “On the bed, James. Now.”

Bucky obeyed silently, lowering himself onto the edge of the mattress. He kept his eyes down, cheeks flushed, chest still tight from crying. His hand throbbed, blood smearing across his palm.

Valeria set the basin on his nightstand, warm water in it already. She turned the radio off and soaked the rag. Then took his hand in hers, firm, no room to pull away, and pressed the damp cloth against the cuts. He hissed, shoulders tightening.

“Shh, it’s not so bad. Just small cuts, they’ll heal soon,” she murmured automatically, her voice softening. “It will sting in a moment. Be still.”

The cool water turned pink as it washed the blood away. She turned his hand gently, careful not to press too hard against the deeper slices.

“You broke the mirror,” she said, not a question.

Bucky swallowed hard. He kept his gaze on the floorboards, ashamed to look at her. “Yeah.”

“How?”

He hesitated. His throat felt dry. The truth clanged in his chest, too heavy to let out. He couldn’t tell her. He couldn’t say *I was trying to force myself to be normal, and I failed. I’m broken. I’m not what you think I am.* She’d never understand.

So he muttered instead, “I was tired. Half asleep. I tripped and knocked into it.”

Valeria’s eyes flicked up at him, dark and sharp, studying his face like only a mother could. She dabbed at another cut, jaw tightening. “Mhm,” she said, unconvinced.

“It’s true,” Bucky added quickly, voice defensive. “I wasn’t paying attention. I’m fine.”

“You are not fine.” Her tone was flat, almost scolding. “You look terrible all week. You don’t sleep. You don’t eat like before. You sit

with your shoulders hanging like the weight of the world is on them. And now this." She wrung the rag out in the basin, pink water swirling down the cloth. "You think your mother is blind?"

Bucky's jaw clenched. He hated how seen he felt under her gaze, like she could peel away all the careful layers he used to hide his mess. He tried to come up with something, anything that would push her back without revealing the truth.

"It's just school," he said quietly. "And Steve. We had a fight, you know that."

Valeria exhaled through her nose, dabbing his knuckles again. "Yes. But a fight with a friend does not make a boy look like a ghost."

The alcohol bottle came next. She uncapped it, the sharp smell biting through the air. "This will burn."

"I can handle it," Bucky muttered.

And he did, sitting stiff and silent as she poured it over the cuts. The sting was intense, shooting up his arm, but he only flinched once. His mother worked quickly, wrapping the clean bandage around his hand, tying it snug.

When she was done, she kept his hand in hers for a moment longer, thumb brushing over the fresh cloth. She looked up at him with worried eyes. "James… my boy. I don't know what is in your head, but it is eating you alive. If you cannot tell me, then tell God. He hears, even what you cannot say out loud."

Bucky's lips parted, but nothing came out. He wanted to scoff, to tell her that God wasn't going to fix what was wrong with him. Instead, he just whispered, "I'm sorry."

Valeria shook her head. "No apologies. Just… pray. Ask for strength. You think you have to carry everything alone, but you don't." She stood, gathering the basin and the rag, sighing as she surveyed the broken mirror. "I'll tell your father it fell by accident. He will be angry, but less so if I say it that way."

Bucky looked up sharply, panic flashing in his eyes. "Don't- don't tell him I-"

"I said accident," she repeated firmly, cutting him off. "That is all he will hear."

Relief mixed with shame in his chest. He slumped forward, elbows on his knees, staring at the floor. “Thanks, Ma.”

Valeria bent and kissed the top of his head, her lips lingering for just a second. “I’ll help you clean up the mess in a moment.”

And with that, she swept out of the room, leaving him sitting on his bed.

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> I hope you're all well fed with chapters for now. I'll see you again sometime next week, though I can't promise exactly when yet, since finding peace and quiet to update has become a bit of a quest lately. I'm currently working on the last few chapters of this fic, and every time I come back to these early ones, I can't help but smile at how easy it all used to feel. Funny how that works.
>
> As always, thank you for reading. I'm really looking forward to your comments and feedback. If you haven't already, feel free to follow my insta @meshe.fx so you don't miss any updates. And maybe I'll even drop a cute little Stucky edit on TikTok soon, hehe. Have a lovely day <3

Friday, May 12th, 1940 - 40 days left

The street outside the Brooklyn dance hall hummed with noise. Couples walked past in twos and threes, laughing, tugging each other toward the warm glow spilling from the doors. Steve stood off to the side, half-hidden in the shadows of the brick wall, wringing his hands together until his knuckles ached. His tie was a little crooked, his suit too big on him. He felt sick with nerves, heart thumping in his chest like he was about to have a panic attack.

He didn't even know if Bucky would come. He did agree, but that was just one thing. He could have changed his mind, forgotten, or simply decided he still hated Steve.

He rocked on his heels, chewing at the inside of his cheek, glancing up every other second at the corner of the street. And then, there he was.

Bucky.

The boy came walking down the block like he always owned it, shoulders straight in his suit jacket, hair slicked back, neat and shining under the streetlight. He didn't look all put together, though. There were shadows under his eyes, a heaviness in his jaw, but he looked like Bucky. Like Steve's Bucky, dressed sharp and stepping out into the world.

Steve's breath caught. His fingers trembled worse now, twisting over

each other.

Bucky spotted him and gave the faintest little nod, a polite acknowledgment instead of his usual easy grin. He came up slow, hands in his pockets.

Steve blurted the words before Bucky could even say hello.

“I’m so glad you came- I didn’t think you’d really come, I mean, after everything, and I-”

Bucky arched a brow, stopped a foot away. “Hi to you too, Stevie.”

Steve flushed scarlet. “Sorry. I just- I’m real sorry, Buck. About all of it. I was a lousy friend, and I shouldn’t have-”

“It’s okay,” Bucky cut in, voice even. He gave the faintest smile, though it didn’t quite reach his tired eyes. “I’m here, ain’t I?”

Steve shook his head quickly, throat tightening. “No, it isn’t okay. I don’t want you thinking I brushed it off. I hurt you, Buck, and I- I hate myself for it. I should’ve told you about Peggy, I should’ve said no, I should’ve-”

Bucky lifted a hand, like he was brushing the words out of the air. “Stevie.” His tone was quiet but firm. “It’s done. I punished you too hard for it, I think. It got messy. I… can move on now.”

The words caught Steve off guard, leaving him blinking. Move on? Just like that? He searched Bucky’s face for the catch, the hidden bite, but all he found was exhaustion and something else buried deep, something he couldn’t quite name.

“Oh,” Steve managed, still flustered. “Well- I’m glad, I mean. Really glad. I don’t deserve it but-”

"Don’t say that,” Bucky interrupted, voice rougher this time. “You’re my best pal. You always deserve another chance.”

Steve’s chest ached at that. He reached up, almost without thinking, to brush his thumb over the corner of Bucky’s lip. A split cut there caught the light, red and obviously fresh. And the bandages on his knuckles, white cloth, stiff with dried blood, stood out against his suit.

“Buck,” Steve whispered, his stomach sinking. “What happened?”

Bucky pulled back slightly, shrugging like it was nothing. “Broke my

mirror."

Steve frowned. "That don't explain your lip."

Bucky's eyes flickered, then dropped away. He muttered, "Pops didn't like the mess I made."

Steve's whole body went tense, fists curling without meaning to. His voice came low, heated. "He hit you again?"

Bucky waved it off with a half-hearted smirk, though it didn't fool Steve. "Don't look at me like that, Stevie. I've had worse. Don't worry yourself."

"I can't not worry," Steve shot back, a sharp whisper that trembled with feeling. "You come here looking like you barely slept a second, beat up by your old man again, and you think I'm just gonna- gonna dance and smile like nothing happened?"

Bucky finally looked at him again, eyes tired, guarded. "I came here 'cause I wanted to. 'Cause maybe I needed something good for a change. Don't make it heavier than it already is, alright?"

Steve reached out and gently touched Bucky's bandaged hand. "Okay. But just so you know. I'm not letting it slide. You don't gotta tell me everything, Buck. But don't ever think I don't care."

For the first time all night, Bucky's smile softened. It was small, faint, but real. "I know, Stevie. That's why I'm here."

Steve swallowed hard, nodding. The two of them slipped through the wide double doors into the golden haze of the hall. The music swelled instantly, brass and strings, laughter, the shuffle of shoes on polished wood. A line of couples swayed and spun under twinkling lights, the air thick with perfume, cigarettes, and the faint smell of booze.

Steve shrank a little at the doorway, but Bucky stepped up bold as ever, slipping right past the ticket boy and nodding to the security man like he belonged.

"We're twenty," Bucky declared smoothly, voice low and confident. "College men from upstate."

Steve blinked, stiff as a board, but the guard didn't even question it, just waved them through.

“See?” Bucky muttered over his shoulder, the faintest smirk tugging at his lips. “Stick with me, Stevie.”

Steve rolled his eyes, trying not to smile.

They drifted toward the bar tucked against the far wall, where colored bulbs glowed and a tired-looking bartender polished glasses. Bucky leaned against the counter with practiced ease, ordering himself a drink like it was second nature. Steve just fiddled with his fingers, eyes on the scuffed wood floor.

When the glass slid across the counter, Steve gave Bucky a look. “You really think drinking’s gonna fix the broken mirror?”

Bucky stilled, just for a beat. Then he huffed a faint laugh. “What is it with you and mirrors, Stevie?” He took a sip, smoothed a hand over his hair. “I already told you, I knocked it over. Sleepy. Dumb accident.”

Steve didn’t buy it, but the sharpness in Bucky’s tone told him not to push. Not here. Not tonight. So he just nodded, quietly.

Bucky caught that, and for a moment, guilt flickered across his face. He cleared his throat, switched the topic to a safer one. “So. Tell me what I missed. Whole week of school without me dragging you around.”

Steve let out a small laugh, almost relieved at the shift. He talked about Dot and Peggy hovering around him, about doodling in his notebook, about Sarah taking him to the movies one evening. Bucky listened, sipping slowly, and for the first time in days, his expression softened.

“Y’know,” he said after a while, voice lower now, “I really missed you, Stevie.”

Steve blinked, caught off guard. “You did?”

Bucky smirked faintly, but his eyes were dead serious. “Don’t look so surprised. I’m a pro at hiding it, sure, but it’s different with you. You keep me steady. Even when you’re drivin’ me up a wall.”

Steve’s heart kicked in his chest, warmth spreading fast. He ducked his head, cheeks burning. “I missed you, too, Buck. More than I wanna admit.”

For the first time all night, Bucky's laugh was light. Real. The weight in his shoulders seemed to ease, if only a little. Sitting there beside Steve, the noise of the hall fading into the background, he could forget. Forget about his father's fists, about the sleepless nights, about the choking knot of shame and denial inside him. With Steve, the misery hurt less.

After draining the last of his glass, Bucky pushed it aside along with a crumpled dollar and stood, offering Steve a hand with a mischievous twinkle. "Alright, Rogers. Let's dance."

Steve blinked, wide-eyed. "Dance?"

"Yeah, you heard me." Bucky grinned crookedly. "Can't go askin' a fella out to a dance and then not actually dance. That'd be a crime."

Steve sputtered, flustered. "I'm not- Buck, y'know I can't dance to save my life."

Bucky only leaned closer, hand still outstretched, grin widening. "Lucky for you, I'm a decent teacher. And besides…" He tilted his head, softer now. "It ain't about the steps. Just come with me."

Steve looked at his hand, then at his face. His chest tightened with something he couldn't name, not yet. Slowly, nervously, he slid his palm into Bucky's.

And Bucky's grip was warm. Steady. Like it always had been.

The band picked up a lively tune, violins sweeping under the brassy rhythm, and the floor came alive with twirls and stomps. Steve clung to Bucky's hand like it was a lifeline as they slipped into the mass of couples. His shoulders were stiff, his steps uncertain, but Bucky only grinned wider, tugging him close with an easy confidence.

"Relax, Rogers," Bucky said, voice pitched low, just for him. "You're not marchin' into battle. You're just movin' your feet. You've danced before."

Steve laughed nervously, already stumbling on the first beat. "Yeah, well, my feet never listen to me."

"Then let me do the talkin'," Bucky replied, smoothly guiding Steve's hand up to his shoulder. He placed his own firm and steady hand at Steve's waist, just enough pressure to steer. "See? Easy. Left foot, right foot. Don't think about it so hard."

The first few measures were chaos, Steve treading on Bucky's toes, apologizing every other second, Bucky snickering every time. But the laughter came easier than the steps, bubbling up between them until Steve's ears went pink and he couldn't stop grinning.

"God, I told you I was terrible at this," Steve muttered after another clumsy turn. Peggy had asked for less fancy moves the last time. Not that he would bring it up. The moment was too nice to ruin it.

"And I told you I'd teach you," Bucky shot back. He spun them gently, catching Steve before he could wobble into another couple. "You're not half bad, Stevie. Just quit apologizin'. You're doin' fine."

Bit by bit, Steve loosened up. He let Bucky lead, let the music carry them. And for a few golden minutes, he forgot the aching guilt in his chest, forgot even Peggy's almost-kiss. All that mattered was the warmth of Bucky's hand in his, the steady rhythm of his laugh, the way his blue eyes crinkled when he smiled.

"See?" Bucky teased as Steve finally managed a clean spin without tripping. "Not so bad after all."

Steve's face broke into a grin. "Guess you're not the worst teacher."

They moved together through song after song, sometimes stumbling, sometimes finding a rhythm that felt like it had always been there. Steve couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed this much. Couldn't remember the last time Bucky looked so free, chin tilted back, lips parted in a grin, eyes sparkling like he'd shaken off every weight in the world.

By the time the music slowed into something softer, they were flushed and breathless, clinging to each other subtly enough to pass as two friends teaching each other dancing to charm girls next week. Steve rested his forehead briefly against Bucky's shoulder, chuckling heavy breaths.

"Think I'm sweatin' through my shirt," he admitted.

"Means you're workin' hard," Bucky teased, squeezing his waist just enough to make Steve giggle. "And hey, didn't stomp on me too hard yet."

Steve's laugh was breathless. "Miracle."

For a while, they just danced to the slower rhythm, surrounded by

couples who held each other close. Steve's heart pounded so loud he was sure Bucky could feel it, but Bucky said nothing. He only leaned in slightly, his breath warm against Steve's ear.

And then, when Steve least expected it, Bucky's voice dropped into a whisper.

"You wanna… slip away a minute?" His lips almost brushed Steve's ear, sending a shiver down his spine. "Maybe hit the restroom. Just us."

Steve stiffened, startled, not at the words themselves, but at the meaning behind them. He pulled back a little, blinking up at Bucky's face. The boy's smile was easy, almost casual, but his eyes… his eyes were cheeky.

Heat rushed through Steve's chest, through his neck and cheeks. He swallowed hard, suddenly aware of every place Bucky's hands touched him, of how close their bodies were, of how long they'd been looking at each other tonight.

The music played on, oblivious. Around them, couples laughed, twirled, kissed. But here, in their small bubble of space, it was just Steve and Bucky, the air between them buzzing with something unspoken.

"Let's go."

—

Steve and Bucky slipped into the men's restroom, the sounds of music muffled outside but still faintly echoing through the hall. Steve's hand trembled slightly as he pushed the door shut behind them, heart hammering in his chest. They paused for a moment, taking in the small, tiled room, the faint smell of soap and disinfectant hanging in the air.

Bucky nudged the door to one of the stalls, a mischievous grin tugging at his lips. "Come on, Stevie," he whispered, his voice teasing. "Just a little… privacy."

Steve flushed, eyes wide. "Are you sure this is a good idea? We could get caught."

Bucky shrugged, leaning casually against the sink. "Who's gonna care? It's a big hall, lots of people, nobody's paying attention." His grin

widened, and before Steve could protest, Bucky stepped closer.

They squeezed into the stall together, laughter spilling out of them. The sound of a couple nearby, bodies slapping together and loud moaning, made both boys freeze for a split second before they burst into quiet, embarrassed giggles.

Steve pressed a hand to his face, muttering, “This is… this is nasty. We could- anyone could-”

Bucky cut him off with a gentle kiss, brushing his lips softly against Steve’s. The nervousness in Steve melted into the warmth of Bucky’s closeness. He couldn’t help but smile into the kiss, heart thudding, feeling the familiar comfort and mischief all at once.

Steve pulled back slightly, eyes darting around the stall. “We shouldn’t- someone could see… this is reckless.”

Bucky just shrugged, eyes sparkling with that familiar carelessness. “Let ‘em. Nobody remembers what happened in the bathroom anyway. We’ll be fine.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t stop the smile tugging at his lips. Bucky pressed the smaller boy harder against the stall wall, both of them whispering and giggling, brushing their foreheads together, and stealing quiet kisses. Every brush of their lips, every stolen glance, was electric, the thrill of being somewhere they shouldn’t be, mixed with the deep comfort of just being with each other again.

Outside the stall, the muffled music continued, the hum of the dance hall mixing with the sound of their suppressed laughter. Steve’s nerves and worry slowly gave way to warmth and a sense of mischief. Bucky’s hand found his, fingers curling together, grounding him.

“See?” Bucky murmured, brushing his nose against Steve’s cheek. “Nobody’s watching. Nobody cares. Just us.”

Steve’s eyes softened, heart catching in his chest. “Just us,” he repeated, letting the tension slip away.

Bucky cracked a lopsided smirk, looking more like his old self than he had in days. His palms were warm, faintly damp from the stuffy air of the cramped stall, as they slid down Steve’s narrow waist with easy familiarity.

“You still trust me, right, Stevie?” he murmured into the curve of

Steve's neck, his breath sending a ticklish shiver over the boy's skin.

Steve didn't hesitate. He nodded instantly, his chest tightening with quiet certainty. He trusted Bucky with his life. Always had, always would.

Leaning back against the cool stall wall, Steve tilted his head, exposing his throat and grinning despite himself. The cold metal pressing into his shoulder blades made the heat of Bucky's mouth all the sharper.

Bucky's lips curved against his skin as he nibbled lightly, teasing a spot that made Steve twitch. His fingers worked at Steve's zipper, tugging it down before slipping the suspenders free. The oversized trousers slid down, pooling around Steve's ankles. He didn't resist, didn't question. Just let the moment swallow him whole. A week apart had been too long. Far too long.

"Should I drop down and suck it?" Bucky whispered, the smile in his voice unmistakable. "Or bend you over and do it right here? Your call, Stevie."

Steve chuckled, reaching up to clutch at Bucky's side. "How generous of you."

"Always," Bucky replied smoothly, toying with the waistband of Steve's boxers. His fingertip found a worn little hole in the fabric, absently playing with it while he waited.

Steve's laugh softened into a breath. "Not sure. Kinda doubt you can pull off the whole 'from behind' thing in a stall." His words were light, but the way his fingers curled tight into Bucky's shirt betrayed his anticipation.

Bucky pulled back just enough to raise an eyebrow, playful as ever. "Are you challenging me, Stevie?"

Steve only widened his eyes in mock innocence before tugging at Bucky's trousers, yanking them down in one swift movement. The beige fabric crumpled onto the tiles, and Bucky let out a dramatic gasp. He gripped Steve's waist, spinning him gently and pressing him forward. Steve caught the toilet seat to steady himself, his breath catching.

"Off with these," Bucky teased, sliding the boxers down and exposing Steve's pale butt to the cool air. A playful slap followed, sharp enough

to make Steve hiss in surprise, then laugh through the sting.

This time, Steve wasn't trembling. He knew how to brace himself, how to breathe. The only thing pulling him from the moment was a sudden thought. "Uh… Buck," he said cautiously, glancing over his shoulder. "We don't have Vaseline."

Bucky smirked, full of that reckless confidence that always made Steve's stomach twist. "Don't need it," he said simply, spitting into his palm and working his hand with casual determination. He carefully spread saliva around Steve's hole. He knew his way around, maybe a little too well.

Steve turned his head just enough to see what Bucky was up to. He caught Bucky spitting into his palm again, using it casually as diy lube with no shame. "Seriously? That's disgusting."

Bucky only raised an eyebrow. "What, you want it to hurt?"

"No…" Steve muttered, already defeated.

"Then quit squirming, punk, and face forward. You're making me nervous."

Steve sighed and turned back to the wall, gripping the edge of the toilet with both hands. He lifted himself just enough, shoulders tense until Bucky's fingers pressed into him and started to stretch his hole. Slow, steady, insistent. Steve focused on his breathing, just like he'd taught himself. In. Out. Stay loose. Stay calm. The more he relaxed, the easier it became to let Bucky work.

The stall was hardly the setting anyone would call romantic. Scuffed tiles, a couple of cigarette stubs ground into the floor, the faint echo of another couple in a stall further down, clearly forgetting the world around them. Steve tried to block out the sounds and the dirt, clinging instead to the fact that this was Bucky. His Bucky.

After a few careful minutes, Bucky withdrew his fingers and tugged his own boxers down, handling himself with quick familiarity as he rubbed saliva on his shaft. He looked at Steve with a flicker of concern. "You okay?"

Steve nodded, eyes darting toward the grimy wall as he tried not to get too grossed out by the setting. "Yeah. You?"

"Don't worry about me, Stevie," Bucky rubbed his dick, positioning

himself at Steve's hole before aiming and pushing slowly against his asshole. "Big breath. Don't move."

Steve did as told, chest rising deeply before he let it out slowly. The first push made him gasp, the ache sharp but familiar, and Bucky's hand gripped his side in grounding reassurance. As he exhaled slowly, Bucky pushed in, moving his hips up and down to slide in the right way.

"Breathe," Bucky muttered before repositioning his hands around Steve's hips, his fingertips pressing into the flesh under the shirt fabric. "In and out, nice and steady."

Steve obeyed, muttering the words under his breath like a mantra. "In… out…" He clenched his jaw, cheeks warm. "Vaseline would've been better, Buck."

"Shhh. Trust me." Bucky's thumb brushed over his hipbone in a fleeting gesture of care before he began to move, inch by inch, pulling back and sliding forward again with patience.

Steve's first moan slipped out unbidden, too loud, and he bit his lip until it stung, desperate to keep quiet. Anyone could walk in. Anyone could hear. The thought made his whole face flush red, though his body still arched back against every careful thrust.

"You still okay?" Bucky asked between breaths, his pace gentle but steady, like he was waiting for Steve's signal.

Steve only nodded, too busy biting his lip raw to form words. His knuckles whitened against the toilet seat as his body adjusted, every shiver and hitch of breath betraying him.

Bucky took the nod as permission to push harder, his rhythm quickening. The sound of skin meeting skin echoed in the cramped space, a noise that made Steve want to throw up in disgust every single time, but his body betrayed him with every pulse of heat and shudder of breath.

"You're doing good," Bucky murmured, half to himself, half to Steve, though his voice broke on a low groan. His motions grew sharper, faster, every ounce of focus pushing him toward the edge.

Bucky had perfected the technique. Every movement was calculated and supposed to bring them over the edge. He had by now figured out the right rhythm. How to cum before Steve's lungs could betray him,

before his heart could protest. He'd learned this well. How to push just hard enough, just fast enough, without crossing that fragile point where pleasure turned into pain for Steve.

Steve could barely manage a sound beyond a strangled hum, his chest rising too quickly, breath fighting to keep up. His whole body trembled, knowing the way Bucky's pace shifted meant he was close.

"I told you- ah- ah" Bucky mumbled in between little moans before a hitch of breath cut him off. "I will- ah- make it work."

Steve could barely manage a sound beyond a strangled hum, his chest rising too quickly, breath fighting to keep up. His whole body trembled, knowing the way Bucky's pace shifted meant he was close.

The cramped bathroom echoed every sound. Every slap of their wet bodies against each other. The rush of breath, the shuffle of shoes against tile, the way their movements echoed too loudly in the small space. If someone walked in right now, they'd hear them. Definitely hear them. That thought flickered briefly through Steve's mind before vanishing entirely between the clouds of lust and the effort not to moan too loudly.

What they were doing was illegal. Steve and Bucky knew that. Most people did. They'd taught it in school, mentioned it in hushed, warning tones, like it was something shameful you were supposed to pretend didn't exist. He'd even looked it up once at the library, heart pounding as he flipped through the book, only to close it again with a tight, sad frown before anyone could see.

"Ah- Ah- faster," Steve gasped, barely recognizing his own voice.

Bucky was just as breathless, murmuring something under his breath as he adjusted, finding a rhythm that made Steve's thoughts scatter completely. He pushed in deeper and quicker, way deeper.

Sodomy laws.

That was the word they used. Cold. Clinical. Like it described something violent instead of two people touching each other because they cared. Laws that forbade men from doing anything of a sexual nature with each other. Forbade it in a way that meant prison, hard labor, lives ruined beyond repair.

Every time Steve thought about it, it hit him square in the chest. A dull, aching blow that left him breathless.

Bucky kept pushing, pulling out until only the tip of his dick was still in before sliding it back in and exhaling loudly.

How could they forbid this? How could something that felt so human be treated like a crime? They weren't hurting anyone. They weren't stealing, destroying, or taking something that didn't belong to them.

They were just loving each other. Like any woman and man who loved each other.

"Stevie?" Bucky murmured, breathless, the sound pulling Steve sharply out of his thoughts. "Still good?"

Steve nodded, forehead resting against the cool porcelain, grateful for the chill against his flushed skin. "Yeah," he breathed. "Just- don't stop."

Bucky let out a quiet laugh under his breath and shifted, moving with more urgency now, hands firm at Steve's waist, grounding him, keeping him steady. With every thrust, he pulled Steve into his dick, his buttcheeks bouncing against his front.

For a split second, the thought of those stupid laws tried to claw its way back in. The fear, the weight of it all. Steve pushed it away just as quickly. Not now. Not here. Not with Bucky's dick in his ass. Not when his body felt like it was on fire with pleasure. Not when he was having sex with Bucky. The real Bucky Barnes. God, how much he loved Bucky.

"Stevie?" In. Out.

"Hmm?" Steve muttered.

"I- ah. I'm cuming." Bucky admitted, his voice breaking on the words.

In and out. One last thrust, and Bucky stopped with a ragged exhale, pulling out. His grip on Steve's waist softened, his forehead nearly dropping against Steve's back as he caught his breath. Slowly, carefully, he pulled away and fumbled for toilet paper, starting to wipe his cum off the tip of his dick.

Steve slumped down onto the toilet lid, chest heaving, one hand pressed against his ribs as if that could steady his heart. He leaned back against the cold tile, watching through half-lidded eyes as Bucky cleaned himself up in silence.

Their eyes met, just briefly, and Bucky grinned faintly, nudging Steve's knee aside to toss the paper into the bowl. "Guess I won the challenge after all, huh?"

Steve let out a shaky laugh, the corners of his mouth curling up despite everything. "Yeah… you did."

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> A cute little update to celebrate the fact that I survived my exam. This weekend is going to be busy with updates for this fic, so buckle up and enjoy!

Sunday, May 13th, 1940 - 39 days left

The church bells rang out across the Brooklyn neighborhood, the crisp October air carrying their metallic song down the narrow streets. Bucky had dragged himself out of bed early that morning, but this time it hadn't been a battle. He'd actually slept. Really slept for the first time in days. The shadows under his eyes had lightened, and the tension in his shoulders had eased a little. There was still the faint sting of his split lip when he spoke or smiled, and the bruise on his cheek was only faintly visible by now. Even his mother had noticed the difference right away and given him a soft pat on the cheek before shooing him out the door with Becca.

When he stepped into the church with his family, the community was already chattering quietly, coats being shrugged off, kids being ushered into pews. It was all routine, predictable. The kind of Sunday rhythm that normally felt heavy, but today it didn't feel suffocating to Bucky quite so much.

And then he spotted Dot.

She was sitting toward the front, her ginger hair catching the morning light filtering through the stained-glass windows, practically glowing. She had on a pale blue dress dotted with little white flowers, a ribbon tied at her waist, and a cardigan draped over her shoulders despite the warmth of the church interior. Her hands were folded neatly on her lap, but when she saw Bucky, her whole face lit up.

"Bucky!" she chirped softly, sliding a little on the pew so there'd be room beside her.

Bucky smiled without meaning to, a real one that crinkled his eyes. He muttered a quick "Morning," and slid in beside her, Becca giving him a teasing nudge before heading off to join her parents chatting with one of the families.

“You look better,” Dot said immediately, turning in her seat to study him. “A lot better. I was worried last week.”

He gave a half-shrug, pretending to be nonchalant, but there was warmth in his voice. “Guess I just needed some proper sleep. And-” He hesitated, then admitted, “-I patched things up with Steve.”

Dot’s smile grew even wider, if that was possible. “Oh, that’s wonderful. I could tell how much it was weighing on you. So… how was it?” She leaned closer, lowering her voice with a playful tilt of her head. “The dance hall. Did you two have fun?”

Fun? If she only knew what had happened in that damn toilet stall.

Bucky ducked his head, suddenly self-conscious, but he couldn’t stop the little laugh that slipped out. “Yeah. It was good. Better than good. He was nervous as hell, kept apologizing every five minutes, but-” He rubbed at the back of his neck, eyes softening. “I really missed him. Being around him again… it felt normal. Like everything else, just… stopped for a while.”

Dot clasped her hands together, almost like she was holding in a cheer. “See? I knew it. You were carrying around that storm cloud, and all you needed was to let a little sun in.”

Bucky gave her a look, amused. “You and your metaphors.”

“Well, I’m right,” she said simply, smoothing her skirt with slim little fingers. Then her gaze flickered down to his hands, and the smile faltered just slightly. “Speaking of storm clouds… your knuckles.”

Bucky instinctively tried to tuck them under the hem of his church jacket, but Dot was faster. She reached out, taking his wrist with gentle fingers, turning his hand to examine the bandaged hand. “You have to stop getting in trouble, Bucky,” she murmured, her brow knitting with concern. “First your face, now this. You’ll run out of skin at this rate.”

He chuckled. “You sound like my ma.”

“Good,” Dot replied firmly, releasing his hand with a final pat. “Somebody’s got to say it. You might think it’s nothing, but people notice. I notice.”

For a moment, Bucky just looked at her, quiet. Dot’s voice wasn’t scolding, it was worried, warm, full of that effortless care she always

seemed to have tucked in her pocket. And he realized he hadn't hated being fussed over. Not by her.

"You really do look better, though," she added, her tone softening again as she studied his face. "Last week you were pale as paper, and I could've sworn you hadn't slept in a year. Now…" She leaned back, analysing him like an artist judging their work. "Now you've got some color again. You even smiled when you walked in."

Bucky laughed under his breath, glancing away to hide the heat that crept to his cheeks. "Guess you're right. Slept like a rock last night. Didn't think I'd ever manage that again."

Dot clasped her hands together, nodding like that was the best news she'd heard all morning. "Good. Keep it up. Don't make me march over and knock sense into you every day."

He chuckled again, shaking his head. "You're bossy, y'know that?"

"Someone has to be," she teased, eyes sparkling. Then, with a curious tilt of her head, she asked, "So… how's Steve? You had him turn into a sad puppy all week."

Bucky's lips twitched into a faint smile. "He is coming over to my place later. After supper, maybe. He said he wanted to."

Dot nudged him lightly with her elbow. "See? You're already better. You've got him back, and you've got me fussing at you. You'll survive."

For the first time in days, Bucky believed it.

—

The little bell above the door jingled as Bucky pushed it open, holding it just long enough for Steve to shuffle in beside him. The comic shop smelled faintly of paper and ink, that particular scent of freshly printed pages and glossy covers stacked high on the rows of shelves. A lazy fan overhead stirred the warm Sunday air, rattling now and then like it had been hanging there since before the Depression.

Steve's eyes went wide the second they stepped inside, taking in the walls lined with brightly colored posters. Caped heroes in action poses, villains with sharp teeth, space battles, and cowboy shootouts all frozen in art. He hadn't been here in a while. Comics weren't exactly in the family budget, not when Sarah had to stretch every

dollar. But still, Steve looked at the rows like a kid staring at Christmas presents.

Bucky noticed and grinned, clapping a hand onto his shoulder. “Feels like heaven, huh?”

Steve gave him a sheepish smile. “Feels like I gotta walk back out before I ruin my ma’s budget.”

“Don’t start,” Bucky said lightly, tugging him toward one of the aisles. “You’re here with me. Which means you’re not leaving empty-handed. End of discussion.”

Steve frowned a little, always hesitant to let Bucky pay for things, but the protest melted under his best friend’s firm look. He let himself be dragged along between the rows, his fingers already twitching with the urge to pick something up.

The shelves were packed full. Detective Comics, Action Comics, Marvel Mystery, or the Flash, pulp sci-fi issues with rockets on the front, Western stories with cowboys staring down at duels. Steve trailed his fingertips over the rows, careful not to wrinkle a page, his eyes darting everywhere.

Bucky plucked one off the shelf and held it up. “How about this? Spacemen battling lizard monsters on Mars.”

Steve snorted. “Looks ridiculous.”

“That’s half the fun!” Bucky chuckled, flipping it open to a splash page with bold reds and yellows. “C’mon, admit it. The art’s pretty slick.”

Steve leaned in despite himself, his artist’s eye picking apart the inkwork. “Okay… yeah. The shadows are good. Strong lines. Guess it’s not too bad.”

Bucky smirked. “Not too bad, he says. High praise coming from Mr. Art.”

Steve rolled his eyes but couldn’t help grinning. He reached for another comic, one with the Human Torch from the Mystery Marvel series fighting on a rooftop. The pose was dramatic, the perspective impressive. “Now this. This is good. See the way they exaggerated the angle? Makes the city look massive.”

“You’re the only guy I know who’d talk about perspective in a comic

book," Bucky teased, nudging him with his elbow.

"And you're the only guy I know who'd actually read about spacemen wrestling lizards," Steve shot back, his grin widening.

They laughed, the kind of laughter that felt like muscle memory after days of tension. For a moment, it really was like the fight had never happened. Just them, shoulders brushing as they bent over issues, debating which hero was the most believable, which villain was the scariest, and which covers looked like they'd been drawn by someone who'd never seen a human body in their life.

Steve kept glancing at the prices, biting his lip. Ten cents here, fifteen there. Small amounts, but they added up too quickly for his family. Bucky noticed, of course. He always noticed. Without saying anything, he casually plucked two comics off the shelf and tucked one under Steve's arm.

Steve blinked. "Buck-"

"Don't," Bucky said gently, his voice low but firm. "Don't start with the 'I can't take it' thing. You can. You will. I want you to. Got it?"

Steve hesitated, but then his small smile gave him away. He held the comic close to his chest like it was a treasure. "You're too good to me, Buck."

Bucky softened at that, his usual smirk turning into something warmer. "Somebody's gotta be. You like this one, pal?"

Steve ducked his head, embarrassed, pretending to focus on the shelf so Bucky wouldn't see the blush creeping up his ears. He glanced at the issue in his hands, the one with the rooftop hero, and smiled. "Yeah, I like this one. You can get your spacemen, and I'll get this."

"Deal." Bucky held out his hand like they were making the most serious deal of their lives. Steve shook it, laughing, and for a second neither of them let go.

Then, like they'd done this a hundred times before, they headed up toward the front counter, comics tucked under their arms, the bell above the door jingling again as another customer wandered in.

—

The late afternoon sun slanted across the quiet Brooklyn street as

Bucky and Steve stepped up onto the Barnes' porch. Bucky shifted the small paper bag of comics in his hand and rang the bell with his free one, glancing at Steve with a half-smile. Steve was still flushed from the walk back from the store, clutching his chosen comic carefully like it might fall apart if he squeezed too hard.

It should have been an easy moment. Just two friends coming back to spend an evening reading together like they always had.

But when the door swung open, it wasn't Valeria's sharp-featured face that greeted them. It was George Barnes.

The man filled the doorway without effort, tall and broad-shouldered, dark hair going gray at the temples, the sharpness of his jawline only made harder by the neatly trimmed beard. He wore his shirt sleeves rolled up, his tie loosened as though he'd just come back from his appointment. The smell of cigarettes lingered on him like it always did.

Steve, polite as always, straightened and gave a respectful nod. "Hello, Mr. Barnes."

George's brown eyes flicked from Steve to Bucky, narrowing just slightly. "Boys." His voice was flat, commanding without even trying as he stepped aside to let the boys enter the hallway. "What've you been up to?"

Bucky's hand tightened around the paper bag. His shoulders, relaxed a moment ago, tensed visibly, and his jaw clenched. But his voice came out calm, careful. "We were just at the comic store, Dad." He held up the bag casually, almost like he could wave the subject away with it.

The reaction came quickly. George's expression shifted, his brows drawing together. His voice was low but sharp enough to sting. "You spent your money on comics?"

Steve blinked, sensing the shift in the air immediately, while Bucky tried to get ahead of it, his words tumbling out. "It was just two issues, Dad. Nothing big."

George's eyes hardened. "Your mother's already trying to convince me to buy a new mirror for your room. Thought maybe you'd put a cent toward that. Or maybe help more around the house, save up some money. But no. You waste it on-" he jerked his chin toward the bag. "that trash."

Steve winced, lowering his gaze to his shoes, which he slipped off. He had seen George Barnes before, knew he was stern, but this edge, this quiet anger, made him shrink back instinctively every single time.

Bucky's chest tightened. He lifted his chin, trying to hold steady though his stomach was twisting. "Dad, please. Not now. Not in front of Steve." His voice dropped. "We can talk about it later. Just… let it be for now, okay?"

George took a step closer, his height looming over both boys. "Don't you tell me when I can speak in my own house."

"Dad-" Bucky tried again, his voice cracking a little now. His hand tightened around the bag, knuckles pale.

The sound of soft footsteps came from the hall, and Valeria appeared, her apron still tied at her waist, her brows knitting as she looked between her husband and her son. "George," she said firmly. "Enough. The boy has Steve with him. Let him be."

"Enough?" George's voice rose, his hand slicing through the air as he turned on her. "Your son breaks a mirror, careless as always, and then spends my money on comics? And you say enough?"

Steve felt frozen in place, caught in the storm. He knew better than to step in, knew this wasn't his fight, but it tore at him to watch Bucky stand there, stiff and small despite his tall frame, trying not to flinch whenever his father's hand motioned around.

Bucky swallowed hard, then glanced quickly at Steve. "Steve, go upstairs. I'll be up in a minute." His voice was soft but urgent.

Steve hesitated, his blue eyes wide, searching Bucky's face as if to ask if he was sure. But Bucky nodded once, barely, and that was enough. Steve ducked his head, clutching his comic tight to his chest, and slipped past Valeria without another word.

As he climbed the staircase, the low, heated murmur of voices followed him. George's sharp, biting tone. Valeria's softer but insistent words, trying to smooth things over, trying to calm the storm before it would even fully arrive. And underneath it, Bucky's voice, tighter, more defensive than Steve had ever heard it.

By the time Steve shut the door to Bucky's room behind him, his chest felt heavy. He sat down carefully on the edge of the bed, laying the comic on the blanket, staring at the empty spot by the dresser where

Bucky's mirror used to stand.

Downstairs, the house was alive with the sound of a storm Steve wasn't meant to see. And all he could do was wait, wishing more than anything that Bucky's father had stayed at work that day.

—

The bedroom door opened with a faint creak. Steve looked up from where he was sitting on the edge of the bed, his comic untouched in his lap. Bucky stepped inside, closing the door behind him with more force than he probably meant to. His hair was slightly mussed from running a hand through it, and though his jaw was visibly tense, his eyes looked tired.

"Well," Bucky said, attempting to form a crooked grin, "good news is, I didn't get a slap this time. Guess that's a win."

Steve frowned, shifting uncomfortably. "Buck…" His voice was quiet, heavy with guilt. His eyes flicked toward the spot near the closet where the tall standing mirror had once stood again. Its absence was so obvious now that he knew how much trouble it caused Bucky. He remembered the old frame, the faint cracks near the edges from years of wear, and now it was just… gone.

And suddenly, the comic in his lap, the one Bucky had insisted on buying for him even though he was supposed to save up for a new mirror, felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. He glanced down at it and then back up at Bucky. "You bought me this," he said softly, "when you should've… You know. Saved it. For the mirror."

Bucky shrugged, tossing the paper bag of his own comic onto the desk. He leaned against it casually, pretending like nothing was wrong. "Pops was just mad over nothing, Stevie. It's fine. He'll forget about it tomorrow."

Steve bit his lip, his hand worrying the edge of the comic's cover. His blue eyes searched Bucky's face. "It's not nothing. You keep saying it is, but…" He hesitated, lowering his voice. "What happened to the mirror, Buck?"

For a second, Bucky froze. His casual air slipped, just slightly. His fingers twitched against the desk, and his gaze darted away, down toward the floor. He sighed through his nose and finally pushed himself off the desk, pacing a couple of steps before stopping.

When he turned back, his expression had softened, but there was something raw there too. Embarrassment, maybe even shame.

“I broke it,” he admitted quietly. His words came out slowly, like they’d been pulled out of him. “Punched it. Like an idiot.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Bucky’s laugh was bitter, humorless. He ran a hand through his hair again, his shoulders tense. “Because I’m pathetic, Steve. Because I was so damn stupid I couldn’t even…” He trailed off, his Adam’s apple bobbing as if the words got stuck on their way out. He looked down at his bandaged knuckles and moved his fingers slowly.

Steve waited, his chest tight, not pushing but not looking away either.

Finally, Bucky exhaled, long and shaky. He sat down heavily on the other side of the bed, not looking at Steve as he spoke. “I was trying to… y’know. With one of those magazines.” He gestured vaguely toward his crotch, his ears burning red. “The ones with… the girls.”

Steve blinked, caught off guard by the rawness of the confession.

Bucky shook his head quickly, rushing to fill the silence before Steve could react. “And nothing happened. Not a damn thing. I just… stood there like a fool. Rubbed myself raw for nothing. Couldn’t feel a thing, not even with that garbage in my face. I got so angry I…” His voice cracked, and he swallowed hard. “I smashed the mirror. Like some crazy person. Pathetic.”

Steve’s heart ached. He turned on the bed, facing Bucky fully. His voice was gentle, steady in the way it always was when he wanted Bucky to believe him. “Buck… that’s not pathetic. It’s not stupid.”

Bucky let out a sharp breath, his hands clenching in his lap. “You don’t get it, Stevie. I’m seventeen years old. A guy’s supposed to…” He trailed off again, jaw tightening. “And I can’t. Not with them. Not ever. What does that make me?”

Steve’s answer came without hesitation. “It makes you you.” His blue eyes radiated sincerity. “And there’s nothing wrong with that. Not one damn thing.”

Bucky finally looked at him then, searching his face, looking for mockery or disgust, but there was none. Just that same softness Steve always gave him, that frustrating, overwhelming kindness. He wasn’t

sure he deserved it. Not when he was such a loser, one big mistake in person.

Steve hesitated, his hand twitching against his knee before he spoke again. “If it helps… I’ll figure it out with you. We’ll figure it out together.”

Bucky’s breath caught. He blinked rapidly, his heart pounding. “Why would you…” He stopped, his voice small now, almost afraid. “Why would you even do that for me?”

Steve’s smile was faint but sure. “Because you’re my best pal. Because I care about you. And because I don’t want you to keep hurting yourself over something you don’t have to carry alone.”

The words hung between them so innocently.

Bucky didn’t know what to say. His throat felt tight, his chest too full. He wanted to believe him, wanted to let that promise comfort the ache in his wounded soul, but shame still gnawed at the edges of his thoughts.

So instead, he cleared his throat and reached for the bag on the desk, forcing a grin back onto his face. “Alright, Rogers. Enough heavy talk. Let’s look at these comics before you wrinkle yours to pieces.”

Steve chuckled softly, letting him change the subject, though the promise he’d made still remained in the air between them. He knew that Bucky wasn’t ready to accept the offer yet.

—

The boys were sprawled across Bucky’s queen-sized bed, the comic between them as they took turns holding the pages flat. Bucky had tucked a pillow against his chest, hugging it absently, his chin propped up on the edge. Steve lay on his side, legs bent, one hand holding his comic and the other loosely tapping against the mattress in rhythm with the muffled music from the radio.

For a while, it was peaceful. Just two boys flipping pages, the faint breathing, and little chuckles whenever something funny came up. Soon enough, Bucky became silent, though, nibbling on his lip as he seemed to zone out, lost somewhere in his thoughts.

Then Steve’s voice broke the quiet. “You’re not even paying attention.”

Bucky blinked, looking up. “Huh?”

Steve grinned, tapping the page with a finger. “You didn’t laugh at the joke. The villain just tripped over his own cape and nearly pressed the bomb button. It’s hilarious. And you didn’t even crack a smile.”

Bucky shrugged, clutching the pillow tighter. “Guess I missed it.”

Steve narrowed his eyes in mock suspicion, then laughed, shaking his head. “You weren’t even reading, Buck.”

Caught, Bucky made a face, then gave up the act entirely. He rolled onto his side, burying his face in Steve’s shoulder. Steve stiffened a little at first, then relaxed, smiling to himself as Bucky mumbled into the fabric of his shirt.

“You smell so good,” Bucky muttered, muffled, his voice low. “Clean. I like it.”

Steve chuckled softly, not moving, just letting him stay there.

Bucky sighed, his breath warm against Steve’s collarbone. “I’m still embarrassed. About the mirror thing.”

Steve turned his head slightly, his smile fading, his voice gentler now. “Buck… you don’t have to be. Not with me. You don’t have to pretend or hide.”

“I smashed a damn mirror, Stevie.” Bucky pulled back just enough to look at him, his eyes searching Steve’s face. “I smashed it because I couldn’t get hard over a half-naked woman. Who does that? Who screws up something that simple?”

Steve didn’t flinch. He didn’t look away. “Not you screwing up, Buck. That’s not what it is.”

Bucky frowned, jaw tightening. “Then what the hell is it? You remember what I said in that fight? That I prayed, every damn night, I’d wake up and be normal. That I’d want girls like I’m supposed to. Like I told you about Evie Novak… everyone wanted her, and me? Nothing. Not even a twitch.”

Steve’s eyes widened just a little as pieces clicked into place. His lips parted, a breath caught in his chest.

“Bucky,” he whispered. “Not everyone has to love-”

Bucky's eyes flashed with panic. He sat up abruptly, reaching across Steve to crank the radio louder until the music filled the room. He sat back against the headboard, his hand raking through his hair, his chest rising and falling fast.

"Don't say it," he muttered harshly. "Don't even say it. You don't know who's listening in this damn house. My old man's got ears like a wolf."

Steve sat up too, slowly, careful not to frighten him further. "Buck… It's just me."

Bucky pressed his knuckles against his mouth, shaking his head. "I can't… I can't talk about this. Not here. Not anywhere."

Steve reached out, carefully, until his hand rested on Bucky's arm. "You can. With me. I won't judge you. I never would."

Bucky's laugh was bitter. "Judge me? Hell, I judge myself enough for the both of us." He stared at the far wall, not at Steve. "Something's broken in me, Stevie. Nobody can fix that."

Steve tightened his grip, steady but not forceful. "You're not broken, Buck."

"Yes, I am." His voice cracked. His eyes shimmered, but he blinked hard, refusing to let it spill. "You? At least you got Peggy. At least you had a girl look at you and want you. And what did I get? A goddamn shattered mirror and a bunch of prayers that don't mean a damn thing." He met Steve's gaze finally, eyes sharp, desperate. "Tell me straight, Steve. Can you… get hard? For girls?"

Steve's breath caught in his throat at the boldness of the question. His cheeks flushed, and he stared down at the sheets, his thumb rubbing a small circle into the fabric. "I… I don't know."

Bucky narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean you don't know? You kissed Peggy."

"I didn't," Steve whispered back quickly, glancing toward the door even though the music was loud. "I pulled away. I told you that."

"Yeah, but…" Bucky trailed off, uncertain, defensive.

Steve shifted closer, his voice quieter, but steady. "She was the first girl who ever showed interest in me, Buck. The first. And I didn't even

kiss her back. I never… tried anything else. So I don't know. I can't tell you if I… can or not." He swallowed. "I just know I didn't want it with her."

Bucky stared at him, searching his face, weighing every word. His chest felt too tight, like something inside him was both breaking and being glued back together at once.

He sighed, long and drained, leaning his head back against the headboard of the bed. "God, Stevie." His voice was quieter now, less sharp, almost defeated. "What the hell are we even doing?"

Steve's gaze softened, his hand still resting on Bucky's arm. "We're figuring it out. Together."

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

> Will I ever stop teasing Bucky's fluffy mess of hair through every possible character? No. Never.
>
> This little chappie was so much fun to write, and I really hope it gives you a good smile, hehe. <3

Monday, May 14th, 1940 - 38 days left

The history classroom smelled faintly of chalk and old paper, sunlight cutting across the rows of desks through the tall windows. The blackboard was already filled with dates and names from the Civil War, and their teacher's voice droned on about battles and political consequences. Most of the students were slouched, half-listening at best, scribbling notes only when the teacher's gaze swept the room.

Steve and Bucky shared their usual desk, the textbook propped open between them. Steve leaned closer, elbows on the desk, while Bucky sat a little back, one leg stretched lazily under the table, his pencil tapping against the margin of their notebook.

Bucky's handwriting was messy as ever, half-legible bullet points scattered across the page, some words smudged where his hand had dragged across the pencil lead. But he was writing. He looked awake, but still better than he had in days. His eyes weren't heavy-lidded or glassy. There was more color in his face, more steadiness in his voice when he mumbled, "Battle of Antietam, September 1862. Bloody as hell. I'll just write… uh… 'lots of casualties.' That covers it, right?"

Steve grinned, doodling absently in the corner of the page. "Sure. Sounds professional enough."

Bucky glanced sideways, catching the little smirk. "What're you even scribbling?"

Steve slid his hand a little to the side, but not enough to really hide it. In the margin of the notebook, a sketch was forming. Loose lines captured Bucky's sharp jaw, his eyes, and his hair falling on his forehead. It wasn't perfect, but it was unmistakably him.

Bucky blinked at it, then let out a short laugh, shaking his head.

“You’re drawing me?”

Steve flushed, hunching a little over the page. “Just practicing. You sit still enough, it’s easy.”

“You’re a weirdo, Stevie.” But Bucky’s grin lingered as he turned back to his notes, scribbling down a new bullet point.

Steve, unbothered by the task at hand for class, started talking. “Had the strangest dream last night,” he said, his pencil moving again as he shaded in a lock of Bucky’s hair. “I was running down the street in my socks. Chased by, don’t laugh, like twenty ducks. Big ones.”

Bucky bit back a grin, not looking up from his notes. “Ducks.”

“Yeah.” Steve gestured with his pencil, animated. “One of ‘em had a hat. Chasing me down like I owed him money.”

Bucky barked out a laugh that earned him a glance from the row ahead. He ducked his head, still chuckling. “You’re losing your mind.”

“Maybe.” Steve’s grin widened, proud that he’d cracked through Bucky’s boring note-taking.

For a few minutes, they worked in comfortable rhythm. Bucky was noting down facts he filtered out of the long paragraph they were supposed to read in their history book. Steve was finishing his sketch and whispering little stories about things that popped into his head.

Then, mid-sentence, Bucky dropped his pencil, leaning back with a groan. “Damn. Forgot my lunch in my locker.”

Steve looked up. “That’s fine. We can grab it before break. I’ll go with you.”

Bucky blinked, a little surprised at the easy offer. “You don’t gotta.”

Steve shrugged. “Of course I do. Besides, I gotta find Peggy and Dot to let ‘em know I’m hanging out with you again. They kept me company when you-” He hesitated, then softened. “-when you asked for space.”

For a second, the words hung in the air.

Bucky raised an eyebrow, a slow, amused expression tugging at his face. “So you’re reporting back to ‘em? Like they’re your babysitters?”

Steve flushed. “No. Just- just telling them so they don’t think I

ditched."

Bucky hummed, twirling the pencil between his fingers now, studying Steve with blue, suspicious eyes. Then he muttered, almost carelessly, "We can spend the break with the girls if you want."

Steve blinked. He hadn't expected that. Not from Bucky, who'd lashed out at Steve with jealousy at even the mention of Peggy before.

"You… sure?" Steve asked cautiously.

Bucky shrugged, writing down another half-legible note about the Emancipation Proclamation. "Yeah. Why not. They're nice enough."

Steve tilted his head, watching him, confused but also kind of touched. "Huh. Well… okay then."

Bucky smirked faintly, keeping his eyes on the page. "Don't look so shocked, Stevie. I can share ya with some pretty girls."

Steve laughed quietly, shaking his head, but something in his chest eased. Bucky looked so much better today. Way lighter, calmer, like the storm had passed. He likes this version of his best friend way more.

—

The hallway was buzzing the way it always did after the bell, people hurrying to be first in the cafeteria line or find their friends in the crowded hall. Steve leaned against the doorframe of their history class, arms folded, satchel tucked under his elbow. Bucky stood beside him, lunch bagless for now.

Mickey and Joey shuffled past, already chattering about something that had them grinning like idiots. Joey threw his hand up, aiming a high five at Bucky.

"Look who's human again," he joked, eyes narrowing at Bucky with mock suspicion. "Didn't think I'd see the color back in your cheeks, Barnes."

Bucky smirked, stepping just out of reach of the high five, hands sliding into his pockets. "You miss me yappin' that much, Joey?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Joey shot back, but he was grinning, elbowing Mickey as they moved down the hall. "We're grabbing the table, don't

make us wait too long."

"We might join later," Bucky called after them with a wave that looked lazy but carried enough warmth to make it clear he meant it.

Steve chuckled, shaking his head. He noticed how natural Bucky looked right then, teasing but easy, not worn down and vulnerable like he'd been days before. Something in Steve's chest loosened.

It wasn't long before Peggy and Dot finally finished packing up, making their way up to the two waiting boys by the door. Peggy, as usual, looked polished in her burgundy skirt and blouse, her dark hair curled neatly, her smile quick and sharp. Dot trailed slightly behind, softer and quieter, but her ginger curls caught the light like fire.

"Waiting on us?" Peggy smiled as she stopped in front of them, arching an eyebrow at Steve like she'd caught him doing something.

Steve, predictably, blushed and stuttered. "Uh- no, well- yes, I mean… we were just-"

"Going to get my lunch," Bucky interrupted smoothly, pulling Steve along by the elbow. He threw Peggy a crooked grin. "Glad you could grace us with your company, Carter."

Peggy rolled her eyes, but she was smiling as the four of them headed toward Bucky's locker.

When they got there, Bucky spun the combination with practiced ease, pulling the door open. The little mirror attached to the inside reflected his face back at him, the line of his sharp jawline, and that damn hair that Steve tried not to stare at.

Bucky dug out his lunch bag and tossed it casually toward Steve. "Here. Be useful."

Steve caught it awkwardly, clutching it to his chest like a shield as Bucky pulled a small comb from the top shelf of his locker.

Then Bucky leaned in, tilting his head just slightly as he ran a hand through his dark hair, taming it in practiced strokes. The motion was unhurried, casual, like he did it a hundred times a day without thinking. But the way his long fingers slid through the waves, the faint smirk on his mouth when he caught his own reflection. It was criminal.

Steve swallowed, gripping the lunch bag tighter and shifting it lower in front of his trousers. God, why did fixing his hair have to look like that? Why did Bucky have to look like that?

Peggy, of course, noticed Bucky's grin too. From her perspective, it came across more as bragging than anything else. "Is this type of hair something American, Barnes?" She leaned one shoulder against the locker beside his, lips forming a sassy grin. "Or are you trying to be one of those artistic types now?"

Bucky didn't even blink. He smoothed the comb down one more time and glanced at her in the mirror. "Romanian roots. Grows quicker than a boy wants."

Peggy blinked. "Wait. You're Romanian?"

"Half," Bucky replied, tucking the comb back into his locker. He shut the door with a little click, leaning back against it with a confident ease that made it hard to tell if he was joking or not. Though Steve was certain that Bucky was, in fact, being sassy on purpose to piss Peggy off.

Peggy grinned, playful. She bumped his shoulder with hers. "European buddies, then. We'll have to stick together."

Bucky smirked down at her, eyes gleaming faintly. "Guess so."

Steve stood there clutching the lunch bag, feeling like the air in the hallway was suffocating his asthmatic lungs somehow. The way Bucky leaned against his locker, his hair falling just so over his forehead, the lazy charm in his smirk. It wasn't fair. Peggy was teasing him about his hair, and Steve was busy trying not to collapse on the floor.

Something about Bucky being a sassy jerk was so damn hot. So hot that Steve wasn't sure how much longer he could stay on his feet or hide the tightness in his trousers behind the lunchbag.

Peggy's hand twitched toward his head. "Can I?" she asked, already half reaching for his hair.

Bucky raised an eyebrow, but didn't move away. "Sure. Why not?"

She ruffled the front strands between her fingers, laughing softly. "Too long, Barnes. You're one inch away from looking like a jazz musician."

Bucky hummed, pretending to pout but not moving her hand off. "My

dad's been trying to buzz it off for weeks now. Keeps saying I look like a rebelling teen. I keep putting him off. Figured I've got a good excuse. Tell him I'm keeping it for church."

That made Dot giggle, nudging Peggy's arm gently.

Peggy laughed, shaking her head. "Rebelling teen."

Steve was barely breathing, eyes darting from Peggy's hand in Bucky's hair to Bucky's lips curling in that little half-smile. He shifted again, pulling the lunch bag closer to his stomach, praying no one noticed the way his ears were burning.

To anyone else, it looked like Bucky was just leaning against a locker, half-smirking while Peggy teased him. But to Steve, every casual flick of his hair, every slouch of his frame, was dangerously attractive.

And Bucky knew it. He didn't look at Steve directly, but there was something in the way he smirked, like he could feel those blue eyes on him, and he didn't mind one bit.

Of course, that jerk knew exactly what he was doing to Steve.

—

A few minutes later, the cafeteria was its usual chaos. Trays clattering, kids laughing too loudly, the smell of overcooked potatoes, and something vaguely resembling meatloaf hanging in the air. Steve and Bucky slid into one of the long tables, Bucky dropping beside Steve so close their knees brushed, while Peggy and Dot took the seats opposite them.

Dot immediately dug a little juice pack from her lunch bag, slipping the straw in with practiced ease. She leaned her elbows on the table, listening rather than speaking, her calm presence almost swallowed by the noise around them. Peggy, on the other hand, had already started talking before Bucky even unwrapped his sandwich.

"Honestly, I don't understand how this school thinks it can serve food like this," Peggy said, wrinkling her nose at the mystery mush on her tray. "It's an insult to anyone with taste buds. In London, we complained about rations during the war, but at least that was honest food."

Bucky snorted, tearing his sandwich in half and nudging the bigger piece toward Steve. "You're a riot, Carter. Complaining about food

like you're in some royal dining hall. This is Brooklyn, sweetheart. The good food is where someone's grandma opened a diner a decade ago."

Peggy narrowed her eyes, though a smile tugged at her lips. "Sweetheart? Oh, Barnes, you're really testing me."

"Not testing," Bucky drawled, leaning back and draping one arm over the chair behind Steve. "Just stating facts." He took a bite of his half of the sandwich and chewed slowly. "Besides, if you hate the food so much, you're welcome to fight me for the rest of mine."

Steve groaned, pressing a hand to his forehead. "You two are impossible."

"Correction," Peggy shot back with a grin. "He's impossible. I'm perfectly reasonable."

Bucky chuckled, already considering his new move to get under Peggy's skin. "Speaking of reasonable. What were you and Dot up to last week, adopting my best pal here like a couple of strays rescuing a pup?"

Steve blinked, almost choking on his bite of sandwich. "Bucky-"

"No, no, I'm serious," Bucky pressed, faking innocence as he tapped the table lightly with his knuckles. "I owe you both a thank you. Poor Steve here, all lonely while I was- let's call it 'under the weather.' You two really kept him busy, huh?"

Peggy tilted her head, sensing the edge beneath his words. "Oh, it was no trouble. We were glad to have him. He kept us entertained."

"Yeah?" Bucky asked smoothly. "And how exactly did he do that? Can't imagine he was cracking jokes."

Steve's face went red. "Bucky-"

Peggy's eyes lit up, clearly delighted at the chance to talk about it. "Well, one afternoon, he came by my place, actually. He showed me a bit of drawing. Basic lines, shading, and how to see shapes differently. He's rather good, you know. It was impressive."

Bucky froze, just for a second. His jaw tensed before he forced it loose again, a lopsided smirk curling onto his lips. He leaned his chin into his hand, studying Peggy like she'd just revealed a juicy secret. "Drawing lessons, huh? Didn't know Steve was giving those out for

free."

Peggy, oblivious to the fact that Bucky already knew and was still kind of pissed about it, nodded brightly. "Oh yes. He has real talent. I can't draw a straight line to save my life, but he has this eye for detail. It's enviable."

Steve shifted uncomfortably, sneaking a glance at Bucky. The look on his best friend's face wasn't angry, not outwardly, but there was something in the way his eyes narrowed, like he was simply waiting to drop a low blow.

Bucky leaned in slightly, his voice smooth but pointed. "Interesting. Because you'd think he'd have told me how amazing your little lesson was. Seeing as I've known him longer than anyone, and all."

Were these two idiots seriously having a "who has the bigger ego?" fight? Jeez…

Steve coughed, discomfort sparking, and quickly kicked Bucky's leg under the table. It wasn't hard, more of a warning nudge. *Cut it out, Buck.*

Bucky flicked his gaze toward him, eyes softening for half a beat, then returned to Peggy with that charming smile plastered right back on. "So, Peggy, how'd he do? Was he a good teacher? Patient, or did he bark at you the way he does when I don't read the history notes right?"

Peggy laughed, shaking her head. "He was perfectly patient, thank you very much. Though now that you mention it, I'd love to see how he teaches you. Something tells me you'd drive him mad."

"Oh, he already does," Steve muttered, ducking his head.

Bucky smirked wider, clearly pleased with himself. He leaned back again, arm still stretched along the bench behind Steve, radiating casual confidence. "Guess that's fair. I drive everyone mad eventually." He popped a bite of sandwich into his mouth, chewing slowly, never breaking eye contact with Peggy.

Dot sipped quietly at her juice pack, eyes flicking between them. She didn't interrupt, but there was a knowing glint in her gaze. Like she saw exactly what game Bucky was playing.

Peggy, of course, wasn't one to back down. She lifted her chin and

smiled sweetly. “Well, you certainly keep things interesting, Barnes. I’ll give you that.”

“Glad to be of service.”

Steve sat there, caught in the middle, shoulders tense. To anyone else, it probably looked like harmless banter, Peggy and Bucky going toe-to-toe in sass. But Steve knew Bucky too well. This wasn’t just talking. It was testing. A game of figuring out who was the better one.

And Peggy. Sharp, witty Peggy wasn’t even aware she was playing.

She leaned forward on her elbows, that sly smile tugging at the corner of her mouth. “So tell me, Barnes, what exactly do you do with all your free time? Aside from… apparently making sure Steve doesn’t get stolen away by other people.”

Stolen away? Steve cringed.

Bucky arched a brow, smoothing his hair back with a sweep of his fingers. God, he was getting cocky. “Oh, you know. Keep the neighborhood safe, impress the crowds, look good doing it. Typical stuff.” He gave her a slow once-over, playful. “And maybe making sure a certain British import doesn’t talk too loud and scare the locals.”

Steve groaned. “Buck-”

But Peggy didn’t flinch. She tipped her head, her British accent wrapping around her words. “Is that so? Well, if I’m frightening, you must be terrifying. Imagine having to live next door to you. Constant hair-combing, smirking at every mirror, flexing in your own reflection… it must be exhausting.”

Dot suppressed a laugh behind her juice box straw.

Bucky grinned like she’d walked into his trap. “Exhausting, maybe. Worth it? Absolutely. Besides, I can’t help it if some of us were just born with it.”

Peggy didn’t miss a beat. “You walk into a room and spend the first five minutes fixing your cufflinks like you’re meeting the Queen. Don’t think I haven’t noticed.”

“Can’t blame me,” Bucky fired back smoothly. “When I’ve got an audience, I like to keep things sharp. Not all of us rely on accents and

clever words."

"Clever words get remembered," Peggy retorted, narrowing her eyes at him. "You? That behavior is just arrogance."

Dot sipped at her juice, finally piping up softly, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."

Both Bucky and Peggy turned to look at her, blinking. She shrugged, cheeks pink as she sipped again. "Proverbs. Just saying."

Steve wanted to melt into the floor. "Dot, make them stop."

Peggy laughed outright, clapping her hands together once. "See, even your church mouse here thinks you're too proud, Barnes."

"Church mouse?" Bucky repeated, smirking at Dot sitting across from him. "Careful, Carter, or she'll start praying for your downfall."

Dot hid her face behind the juice box straw, trying not to laugh. Steve kicked Bucky's foot again under the table so hard that the boy flinched.

"Would you stop?" Steve hissed.

But neither of them did. Of course, they didn't.

Peggy leaned closer across the table, narrowing her eyes with mock suspicion. "You know, I'm starting to think you're jealous."

Bucky's smirk widened, sharp as a blade. "Jealous? Please. If I wanted him to myself, you wouldn't stand a chance."

Steve nearly dropped his sandwich. "Buck!" His face burned red, his voice cracking. He glanced around the table, praying nobody overheard the embarrassing ego fight between the two.

Peggy, though, just arched a brow, lips curving. "That's a bold claim. But I'm not so sure. Steve's perfectly capable of choosing his own company."

Bucky leaned back, draping one arm along the backrest, smirk still plastered on his face. "Yeah. And he's here. Next to me, isn't he?"

Steve buried his face in his hands. Dot chewed her straw, watching with wide eyes.

Peggy tilted her head, a spark of amusement in her gaze. “For now.”

The bell rang before Steve could die on the spot. The shrill sound cut the tension, pulling them back to reality. Kids started pushing back from tables, chatter filling the air as the lunch break dissolved into chaos.

Peggy stood, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, and smiled just a little too sweetly at Bucky. “You’re not bad at this game, Barnes. But don’t think for a second you’ve won it.”

Bucky smirked right back, packing his barely touched half of the sandwich into the bag. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Steve shoved his chair aside, muttering under his breath, “I’m never eating lunch with the two of you again.”

Dot slung her bag over her shoulder, trailing behind them as they left the table. She spoke with a small smile, “That was… entertaining.”

Bucky grinned down at her. “Stick with us, Dot. You’ll never be bored.”

Steve groaned again, trailing behind them all.

The hallway was buzzing as students shuffled toward their classrooms, books tucked under arms, chatter bouncing off the tiled walls. Steve tugged on Bucky’s sleeve the moment they were out of the cafeteria, his small frame bracing against the flow of people until he managed to pull his friend into a quieter corner by the water dispenser.

“Alright,” Steve started, his voice low but sharp, blue eyes narrowed up at Bucky. “What was that back there?”

Bucky leaned his shoulder casually against the wall, adjusting his sleeve like he hadn’t a care in the world. His knuckles, still wrapped in bandages, flexed as he smirked down at Steve. “What was what?”

“Don’t play dumb with me,” Steve pressed, pointing a finger toward him. “You and Peggy. Going at it like you’re fighting in a ring. You nearly gave me a heart attack!”

Bucky chuckled under his breath, brushing an imaginary bit of dirt from his jacket. “Relax, Stevie. It was just a chatter.”

“Just chatter?” Steve’s voice cracked in disbelief. “You practically told

her you were fighting over me!" His ears burned red as he hissed the words, glancing around in case anyone overheard.

Bucky's smirk only grew, and he lowered his voice, leaning just close enough to tease. "Well, wasn't I?"

Steve's jaw dropped. His whole face flushed red now, ears to cheeks. "You- you're impossible. That was Peggy Carter you were bickering with, not Richie or Joey! You can't just- just-" He waved his hands wildly, too flustered to even finish.

Bucky shrugged, easy and smooth as ever. "I just had a feeling it wouldn't work out between you and her."

Steve blinked at him, stunned. "What?"

"Yeah," Bucky said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. "She's not your type."

Excuse me?

"My-" Steve choked, staring at him in disbelief. "My type? Since when do you know my type better than I do?"

"Since always," Bucky fired back with a grin. "C'mon, Steve. You really see yourself with someone like her? She's all fire and challenge. You'd burn out in a week. She'd have you tripping over your own feet before the honeymoon."

Steve groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "You're being a jerk. That's what you were doing. You were poking and prodding her just to prove something."

Bucky straightened, shrugging like it didn't matter. "Maybe I was. Just figuring out who's the better one."

Steve threw his arms in the air. "Better one? Better one at what? At talking the loudest? At being the sassiest in the room?"

Bucky's grin widened, revealing teeth. "Exactly."

Steve glared at him, unable to believe the audacity. "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard."

"And yet," Bucky said smoothly, pushing off the wall to wander toward their classroom, "you couldn't look away, could you?"

“I was trying to keep you from saying something stupid!”

Bucky tossed him a wink over his shoulder. “Then you failed, pal.”

Steve stomped after him, satchel tucked against his chest, muttering under his breath. “I’m surrounded by weirdos with ego problems. Absolute maniacs. Peggy thinks she’s queen of the world, and you- you just gotta challenge her at every turn.”

Bucky pushed the classroom door open for him, grinning innocently. “Hey, at least you’ll never be bored.”

Steve glared up at him as he passed through the doorway, but the corner of his mouth twitched despite himself. “You’re insufferable.”

“And yet,” Bucky drawled, dropping into his seat, “you keep me around.”

Steve slumped into the desk beside him, shaking his head, cheeks still warm. “Lord help me. Why exactly do I keep you around?”

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

> In a few chapters, we'll be looking back at this one with a very big sigh. (Nope. Not foreshadowing anything at all.)

Tuesday, May 15th, 1940 - 37 days left

The boys were herded out onto the field behind the school. Mr. Holleran, their PE teacher, barked orders like he was mistaking high school for the army. He yelled short instructions, hands on his hips, bald head shining in the morning sunlight.

"Alright, boys, we're running laps today. Four to start, no excuses. Pair up, keep pace, no dragging your feet. Let's move!"

The groan from the class rose up like a choir. Joey immediately complained loud enough for half the block to hear, "Four laps? You're tryin' to kill us, teach!" Richie smacked him on the back of the head with a grin.

Charlie and Mickey were already bouncing on their heels, eager like dogs let loose. Mickey, broad-shouldered, full of chest and ambition, cracked his knuckles and adjusted his sweatband like he was training for the Olympics instead of a school gym period. "C'mon, fellas, this'll be easy. Nothin' better than clearing the lungs on a morning."

Bucky rolled his eyes at Joey, smirking. "Guy thinks he's training for the New York Yankees."

Joey laughed, starting to lazily jog as the whistle shrieked again. "More like training for Mr. Holleran's good books. You watch, he's gonna run so hard he pukes, just to get a pat on the back."

The boys spread out across the track, pairs falling into rhythm. Bucky jogged alongside Mickey, trying not to fall behind. Mickey's body was made for this kind of stuff. He was quick, though he liked to talk while running, half the time teasing Joey, who lagged behind them, already huffing and cursing.

"Buck, you see those girls?" Richie tilted his chin toward the basketball court, where the girls' PE group was warming up. The skirts of their uniforms bounced as they jogged around cones, ponytails

whipping behind them. Joey, from three paces behind, whistled so loud it echoed, earning him a sharp “Cut it out, son!” from Holleran.

Bucky gave an exaggerated grin, raising his brows in mock appreciation. “Oh, yeah. Real thrill.”

Richie barked a laugh. “You sound real convincing, man. You forget how to whistle?”

Bucky nudged him with his elbow. “I’ll leave the swooning to you and Joey. You’d fall flat on your face for a pretty girl waving at you from half a mile away.”

Behind them, Joey actually tripped in the grass as if on cue, muttering something about “ankle” while Charlie helped him back up, shaking his head.

But even as Bucky joked, his eyes flickered forward, searching the track for a smaller frame. Steve was running alone, as usual. His pace was way slower, breaths already a bit uneven, though his stubbornness kept him from sitting this one out. Every so often, Steve pressed a hand to his ribs like he was telling his lungs to behave.

Mickey followed Bucky’s gaze, his grin fading. “You gonna keep staring at him or actually run your laps?”

Bucky shot him a look but didn’t deny it. “Somebody’s gotta keep an eye out. He’ll push himself till he keels over if nobody stops him.”

Sure enough, on the far stretch of the track, one of their classmates overtook Steve with a clap on the back, shouting, “Keep it up, Rogers, you’ll get there!” before rushing past, his laugh trailing behind. Steve smiled faintly, but his face was already flushed, chest heaving.

Bucky clenched his jaw. He picked up the pace just a little, enough to close the gap to Steve a little while still keeping up with Joey at the end now.

“You’re like his shadow,” Joey teased lightly, though his tone wasn’t unkind. “You know, one of these days he’s gonna be sick of your mothering.”

“Good,” Bucky muttered, keeping his eyes fixed on Steve. “Means I’m doing it right.”

When they rounded the turn again, Richie and Charlie caught up from

behind, their chatter loud. Richie, lean and easygoing, waggled his brows. “You two see Evie Novak’s legs today? Jesus, I’d run eight laps if it meant jogging behind her.”

Joey wheezed, “Forget legs, I’m about to die. Someone tell my ma I loved her.”

The group burst into laughter, even Bucky cracking a small grin. But still, his gaze slid forward, checking on Steve’s hunched shoulders, the determined set of his jaw.

He sighed, feeling the weight in his chest that had nothing to do with the laps. Steve was tough, tougher than anyone gave him credit for. But he was also fragile, and Bucky couldn’t help himself. He’d always run his own race with half his attention, the other half fixed on that stubborn blond with too much fight and too little air.

—

The sun was higher now, warming the grass as the boys’ sneakers thumped around the track. From across the field, bursts of laughter carried over from the girls’ group, their bright skirts flaring as they jogged and stretched. Every boy on the track stole glances, even Mickey, serious as he was, kept looking over at the line of ponytails and long socks.

“Buck, would ya look at them?” Richie hissed through a grin, nodding toward Dot, giggling at something Peggy had said. Joey nearly tripped again, craning his neck.

Bucky faked enthusiasm, cupping his hands around his mouth in mock cheer. “Go, girls, go!” He winked at Joey, who burst out laughing, nearly tripping over once again as he ran.

But his laugh dropped when he saw Steve struggle. The small blond had been keeping pace stubbornly, his fists clenched, face red, but now he slowed. One hand pressed to his chest as his breath came short and sharp. Then he stumbled, bending forward with a hard cough, knuckles white where they gripped his shirt.

The whistle shrieked. “Barnes!” Holleran’s voice cut across the track. “Get Rogers to the bench. Move!”

Bucky’s stomach dropped. He sprinted over without hesitation, sliding an arm under Steve’s shoulders just as his friend’s knees threatened to give out.

“I got you, pal,” he muttered, low, steady, the same tone he’d used for years whenever Steve’s lungs betrayed him. “C’mon, easy now. Just lean.”

Steve’s face was pale, his breath ragged as Bucky guided him to the sideline. The bench was cool against the back of his legs as Bucky eased him down, crouching in front of him in the grass.

“Breathe, Stevie. Don’t fight it. Just slow.” His voice softened, urging rather than commanding. He held the emergency inhaler out, already pulled from Steve’s satchel pocket, because of course, Bucky knew exactly where he kept it.

Steve shook it, pressed it to his lips, and pulled a deep breath in, then another. Color slowly returned to his cheeks as the tightness in his chest eased.

“You idiot,” Bucky muttered, though his tone was fond, his palm still braced lightly against Steve’s shoulder. “You were pushin’ too hard again. Four laps don’t mean anything if you end up in the nurse’s office.”

Steve managed a weak smile, his voice scratchy. “I just wanted to keep up.”

“Yeah, well, you almost fainted for it. You don’t need to prove anything to Mickey or anyone else, alright?” Bucky’s thumb brushed unconsciously along the fabric of Steve’s shirt, grounding him.

Before Steve could answer, a shadow fell over them.

“Well, well. If it isn’t Barnes, the babysitter.”

Bucky’s head snapped up, jaw tightening.

Howard Stark leaned lazily against the end of the bench, dressed not in gym clothes but in slacks and a crisp button-up rolled at the sleeves. His tie was loosened, his hair slicked back just so. Even at seventeen, he carried himself like someone twice his age. Charming, untouchable, the boy everyone whispered about.

He smirked down at them, his brown eyes sparkling with mischief. “Rogers, you look like hell.”

Steve, still catching his breath, offered a faint grin. “Thanks, Howard. Real sweet of you.”

Howard chuckled, straightening up and shoving his hands into his pockets. “Why should I sugarcoat it? You’re wheezing like an old man. Thought you might keel over before lap two.”

Steve huffed out a laugh, though it came with another cough. “What are you even doin’? Skippin’ class again?”

“Not skipping.” Howard pulled his trousers up to reveal his ankle, which was wrapped in a neat white bandage that looked suspiciously untouched. “Pulled a muscle last week. Doctor’s orders. No running, no laps. Tragic, really. Guess I’ll just have to sit on the bench and watch everyone else run around like idiots.”

Bucky’s eyes narrowed, though he stayed quiet. He’d heard all the stories about Howard. About girls crying after his parties, about how his father swept things under rugs with money and influence. Howard was slick, too slick, and Bucky didn’t trust that kind of smooth grin.

But Steve? Steve chuckled, wiping sweat from his brow. “Figures. You always get out of everything.”

Howard shrugged like it was a gift. “Perks of being me, Rogers. Some of us are destined to live comfortably while the rest of you poor saps sweat through gym.” His gaze flicked between the two of them, lingering just long enough on Bucky.

Then, with a grin that lit his face, Howard leaned in. “Speaking of perks, I’m throwing a party Saturday. Parents’ll be out, the place’ll be stocked, music, girls. Real party, not one of those kiddie socials. You two should come. Bring whoever you want.”

Steve perked up instantly. He had never been invited to a Howard Stark party before, not once in all the years Howard had been hosting them in his mansion-like home. “A party?” he repeated, voice laced with awe.

Howard clapped him lightly on the shoulder, careful not to hit him too hard. “That’s right, Rogers. Even you, asthma and all, deserve a little fun. Don’t worry, I’ll make sure someone saves you a seat before the dancing starts.”

Bucky stayed crouched at Steve’s side, watching carefully. He could already feel it. Howard’s way of pulling Steve in, making him feel special, seen. Steve would fall for it because Steve wanted so badly to belong.

“Saturday,” Howard said again, backing away with a grin. “Don’t make me regret inviting you. And Barnes? Try not to scowl the whole time, huh? Parties are more fun when you actually smile.”

With that, he strolled off, slipping past Holleran with a pat on the back as if teachers never touched him with rules.

Bucky muttered under his breath, just loud enough for Steve to hear. “That guy’s trouble.”

Steve, still holding his inhaler, smiled faintly. “He’s not so bad.”

—

The May sun was generous, warming the schoolyard so that every shadow felt like gold. The boys had crowded their usual lunch table. Charlie was already puffing lazily on a cigarette, smoke curling into the blue sky. Steve sat to his right, trying to lean away from the drifting cloud with a polite cough.

Across from them, Bucky sprawled back, sleeves rolled to the elbows, his lunchbag open between him and Steve. He was halfway through a ham sandwich, while Steve, without ever asking, kept taking cookies from the wax-paper packet. Bucky let him. He always did.

Richie and Joey had their trays packed, while Mickey was muttering about protein and training like always.

The table, though, had one central topic today. Howard Stark.

“I’m tellin’ you,” Bucky said, gesturing with half a sandwich, “he’s all show. That smirk, the hair gel, the fancy cufflinks. He’s been like that since we were ten. Just worse now ‘cause his old man’s got even deeper pockets.”

Richie snorted, flicking his straw wrapper at Bucky. “C’mon, Buck, you’re just jealous he’s got a car, and you don’t.”

“I don’t need a car to be a jackass,” Bucky shot back smoothly. “Howard’s born with it. Everything’s a damn flex. ‘Oh, my daddy’s got this contract, oh, we’ve got this shiny new phonograph from Europe.’ Like anyone cares.”

Mickey grunted. “His dad’s important. Tech for the Army, right? Supposed to be some genius.”

Bucky shrugged, sipping from his bottle of water. “Yeah, my old man knows him. Says he’s sharp. Doesn’t mean Howard gets a medal for it. That boy didn’t invent a single thing in his life, just rides the wave of money.”

Charlie blew smoke rings into the air, smirking. “Still throws the best parties. Don’t deny it, Barnes. You’ve been.”

“Yeah,” Bucky admitted, nose wrinkling. “Used to be fine when we were younger. Pool out back, fireflies, summer stuff. Then he hit fifteen and decided every party had to be him showin’ off his liquor cabinet and who he can drag upstairs. Haven’t gone in a year.”

Joey leaned in with a grin, voice dropping as if the whole yard wasn’t already buzzing about the same rumor. “What about that girl? The blonde? Didn’t she vanish after last summer?”

“Yeah,” Richie cut in, rubbing his nose. “My cousin swears her aunt knew the family. Said Howard knocked her up, and-” he made a cash-counting gesture, lips curling “-Stark senior paid her to disappear. Whole family gone like that.” He snapped his fingers.

Steve’s eyes went wide. “No way. For real?”

He had never been to Stark’s parties or known him much at all. Bucky had always tried to drag him there back when he was still going to those parties himself, but Steve had always found a way to refuse. Big ass house parties were never his thing,

Bucky gave a sharp laugh, though he wasn’t amused. “For real. That’s Stark. Rich boys don’t clean up their own messes. They just pay to sweep it under the rug. You think he’s still thinkin’ about that girl? Bet he doesn’t even remember her name.”

Steve, who’d been quiet, chewed slowly on another of Bucky’s cookies, listening with furrowed brows. “She was in our year, wasn’t she? Judy… no, not Judy. Someone else.”

“Nah,” Richie shook his head, “Judy’s still here. It was… what was her name? Something with an L.”

“Linda?” Charlie guessed, exhaling smoke through his nose.

“Yeah, maybe. Doesn’t matter,” Bucky muttered, taking the last bite of his sandwich and crumpling the paper. “She’s gone, that’s the point. That’s the Stark way. Burn bright, toss the match, and let Daddy fix

it."

Joey whistled low. "Still… bet Saturday's party is wild. Free booze, free music. Can't say I'm not tempted."

"Yeah, until you end up pukin' on his velvet carpet," Bucky teased. "Then you'll see how generous Howard really is."

Steve, though, stayed thoughtful. He could never quite tell if the stories were made up or true. Howard always seemed… kind to him, at least on the surface. But hearing Bucky's voice, so sharp, dismissive, laced with that old familiarity of someone who knew Howard before the shine, made him rethink.

The conversation dipped into loud laughter again, Joey making some crack about Mickey trying to impress girls with push-ups at the party. The boys laughed, Mickey defending himself seriously as always.

Steve was halfway through another cookie when his gaze shifted toward the building. He spotted three familiar figures crossing the yard. Evie with her blonde curls bouncing, Dot carrying her ever-present notebook tucked against her chest, and Peggy walking ahead with that self-assured swing of her hips.

Steve swallowed quickly, nudging Bucky under the table and nodding toward the approaching girls. Bucky's easy smirk faltered just slightly as he turned, the gossip souring in his mouth.

And just like that, the air at the boys' table changed.

The yard was noisy, but the moment Peggy, Dot, and Evie approached, their little group of boys seemed to straighten up in unison. Mickey smoothed his shirt, Charlie stubbed out his cigarette under his heel, and Joey, grinning like a fool, made room by almost shoving Richie off the bench.

Peggy, naturally, took the lead. "Move over, you pack of mutts," she teased, squeezing herself down between Joey and Richie, her skirt tugged neatly under her legs. Dot followed, a shy smile in place as she perched beside Charlie, careful not to inhale any of the lingering smoke.

Evie, though, made a beeline straight for Bucky. She gave Steve a quick hello before poking Bucky right between the shoulder blades with her manicured finger. "Barnes," she giggled, "shift over, would ya? You're taking up all the space."

Bucky shifted with a sigh, eyes meeting Steve's as if asking him for help. Steve cracked a smile back and shrugged his shoulders mockingly. Evie squeezed in on Bucky's side, close enough that her floral perfume curled into his nose.

"So," she began breezily, propping her chin on her hand, elbow leaning against the table like she owned the place, "you boys hear about Stark's party this weekend?"

"Oh, we heard," Richie chimed in, grinning at her. "Matter of fact, we were just sayin' we'll show up. Right, fellas?"

"Wouldn't miss it," Joey said, already puffing himself up. "Word is half the school's gonna be there."

"More than half," Peggy corrected sharply, reaching across the table to steal one of Bucky's cookies. "Howard's got every junior and senior on his list. And probably half the college boys, too."

Dot nodded and muttered, "Sounds like Sodom and Gomorrah," earning a laugh from Richie and a fond eye-roll from Peggy.

Evie ignored them all, keeping her gaze firmly on Bucky. "What about you?" she asked sweetly, her lashes fluttering just a little too much. "You coming, Barnes?"

Steve, stiff at the edge of the bench across from them, felt the way his friend's leg wiggled nervously under the table. Bucky gave her a polite smile, not looking her in the eyes. "Eh. Maybe. We'll see."

"Maybe?" Joey repeated, instantly seeming offended by the mere thought of Bucky missing out on the party. He elbowed Richie, who smirked knowingly. "Oh, come on, Buck. Evie just asked you herself. You gonna make her beg?"

Bucky shot them both a look. "Don't start."

But Evie wasn't discouraged. She tilted her head, curls brushing her shoulder, and leaned a touch closer, her perfume stronger now. "It'll be fun. Music, dancing… maybe you save me a dance, hm?"

Richie let out a low whistle. "Barnes, she's handin' you the invitation gift-wrapped."

Charlie barked a laugh. "And he's sittin' there like a stone. C'mon, Buck, you forgot how to flirt?"

“I didn’t forget,” Bucky muttered, scratching at the back of his neck, eyes darting down to his bandaged knuckles. “Just ain’t in the mood.”

“Not in the mood?” Joey squealed. “For Evie Novak? Hell, half the guys in school would sell their left foot for a shot.”

Evie sighed dramatically, tapping her finger against his arm. “You always brush me off. Don’t tell me you’re saving yourself for somebody.” Her smile was playful, but there was a flicker of expectation there, as if she half-believed he might finally give in.

Bucky’s Adam’s apple throbbed. He chuckled faintly, but it sounded forced. “Maybe I am.”

The table erupted with laughter and whistles, Joey slapping the table. “Hear that, Novak? You’re losin’ to some mystery girl!”

Peggy raised an eyebrow, eyes narrowing in sharp interest. “Mystery girl, huh? This is new.”

Steve flushed red, hunching his shoulders as if to disappear into the bench.

Bucky, keeping his cool mask firmly in place, took a swig of water. “Or maybe I’m just not interested in being another notch on Novak’s lipstick tube,” he said smoothly.

“Ooooh!” Joey howled. Even Peggy gave a short bark of laughter at that, and Evie’s smile faltered for just a second before she recovered, rolling her eyes.

“You’re a jerk, Barnes,” she said with a pout, nudging him with her shoulder.

“Yeah,” Bucky replied lightly, brushing her off with practiced ease, “that’s what they all say.”

The bell rang just then, saving him from more teasing, but the boys were still chuckling as they stood. Steve lingered close to him, quiet and protective, while Bucky dusted crumbs from his slacks, his easy smirk hiding the storm of discomfort beneath.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

> Please do not fact-check me on the Civil War… I tried, I really did. I'm not American, most of this came from Google, and I'm simply choosing to believe it's correct.
>
> That said, history is just a side quest anyway, so let's focus on the actually important stuff: Steve discovering the power of topping.

Wednesday, May 16th, 1940 - 36 days left

The little Rogers apartment smelled faintly of burnt food, the windows cracked to let in the evening air. The fish sticks sat forgotten on the counter, and the mashed potatoes, overly salted but still edible, had been left half-eaten in mismatched bowls. Studying was supposed to be the reason Bucky sprawled shirtless on Steve's narrow bed, history notes scattered between them. But like most things in their friendship, the "plan" had quickly become something else.

Bucky lay flat on his back, his hair tousled from running a hand through it too many times while reading. A penciled sheet of Civil War notes rested on his stomach, rising and falling with every breath. He squinted at the scrawled handwriting on another sheet, voice steady but tinged with mock seriousness as he read aloud.

"'Battle of Antietam, September seventeenth, eighteen sixty-two… single bloodiest day in American history…'" He trailed off, raising an eyebrow. "You wrote this part, right? The one about McClellan being a 'bonehead general who couldn't win even with God Himself holding his hand'?"

Steve, half propped on an elbow beside him, chuckled, his pencil tapping against the margin of Bucky's shoulder. "'Cause it's true. Man had Lee cornered and still let him hold ground. History remembers the fools same as the heroes."

"You're a nerd," Bucky teased, flipping the page, though his grin softened when he felt Steve's fingertip tracing along the line of his collarbone.

Steve had been doing that for minutes now. Absently, like he couldn't help himself. His small hand wandered gently, following pale scars,

fading yellow bruises, and birthmarks as if each one told its own story. He murmured little corrections whenever Bucky misread a date or skipped a detail, but his attention seemed as much on the boy beneath him as the notes themselves.

“Here,” Steve whispered suddenly, leaning down to press the tip of his finger against a tiny birthmark just above Bucky’s rib. “That one looks like it belongs on a star chart.”

Bucky snorted. “Star chart? What am I now, the night sky?”

Steve smiled, shy but bright, his eyes glinting like he really believed it. “Nah. Better than that. The stars don’t grin like an idiot every time they win an ego fight.”

Bucky reached over and ruffled his hair, laughing. “You’re hopeless.” But he didn’t stop Steve when his hand drifted again, tracing lightly over his chest, pausing at a fading bruise there.

“You still sore?” Steve asked softly, his smile dipping into concern.

Bucky shrugged, playing it off, though the warmth in his eyes gave him away. “Not much. Hardly notice anymore. The one on my cheek is gone, see?”

Steve frowned, glancing at the faded bruise that had been on Bucky’s cheek for more than two weeks. He shifted closer, his chin nearly resting on Bucky’s chest now as he stared at the little marks like they were clues to some great mystery. His thumb brushed a pale birthmark near Bucky’s shoulder, slow and tender. “This one’s shaped like a heart,” he said, voice full of quiet awe.

Bucky rolled his eyes, though his cheeks warmed. “You’re makin’ things up.”

“No, I mean it,” Steve insisted, leaning down so his nose brushed Bucky’s skin, his breath tickling. “It’s right there, look. Like someone wanted you to carry it with you.”

“Maybe it’s just a blotch,” Bucky muttered, but his hand came up anyway, curling loosely around Steve’s wrist as if to keep him there.

Silence fell for a moment. Steve, half lying across him now, traced the pattern of his chest, connecting invisible lines. Bucky glanced down at the boy’s messy blond hair, the concentration on his face.

“Y’know,” Bucky said after a beat, voice low, “we’re supposed to be studying.”

“We are,” Steve argued, though his pencil was abandoned now on the bed. “I’m studyin’ you.”

Bucky barked a laugh, the sound echoing off the small bedroom walls, but it quickly faded into something softer. Something that made his chest swell in the best way possible. He lifted his free hand, brushed his fingers through Steve’s hair again, and sighed. “You’re really somethin’, Stevie.”

“This is my personal revenge for the ‘we study algebra’ incident, jerk.” Steve tilted his head up, meeting his gaze, and chuckled. There was that spark again, the one that always warmed Bucky from the inside, even when he swore the world had nothing left to offer him.

And for a while, history didn’t matter. Antietam, Gettysburg, McClellan’s blunders. All of it faded. There was only Steve, half draped across him with the weight of trust and quiet love, and Bucky, clutching his notes with one hand and his best friend with the other, heart thumping too fast for someone who pretended to be unfazed.

Eventually, Bucky shifted under the warm weight draped half across him, trying not to laugh as Steve’s breath warmed his collarbone. “We’ve gotta get back to studying, punk,” he murmured, tapping the notebook beside them.

Steve didn’t move right away. He just grinned, his chin resting near Bucky’s shoulder. “I know most already,” he said in that lazy voice that made Bucky roll his eyes. “You study. I’m observing.”

“Observing what, exactly?” Bucky asked, pretending to sound annoyed but failing miserably as he smirked.

“Your concentration,” Steve replied, eyes filled with mischief.

Bucky groaned and shoved him lightly off himself. “Come on, professor. You already know all this stuff. Help me out instead of being a pain.”

Steve finally sat up on Bucky’s crotch. “Alright, alright,” he said, reaching for the notes and flipping through them. “Let’s start with the basics. The Civil War lasted from 1861 to 1865. Fought between the Union and the Confederacy.” He looked up, quirking an eyebrow. “You got that memorized, soldier?”

Bucky chuckled. “Yes, sir. 1861 to 1865. Union versus Confederacy. I ain’t gonna forget it now that you said it like a drill instructor.”

Steve grinned. “Good. Now, why’d the war start?”

Bucky frowned, scratching the side of his cheek. “Uh… states’ rights? And slavery. Mostly slavery.”

“Exactly.” Steve’s voice softened, proud in that quiet way that made Bucky’s chest feel too small. “It was about whether the new states joining the Union would allow slavery or not. Lincoln’s election in 1860 was the final spark.”

Bucky leaned back, picking up his pencil. “Right, right. Lincoln. Gettysburg, Antietam, all that.”

Steve leaned closer, pretending to squint at Bucky’s handwriting. “You spelled Antietam wrong again.”

Bucky made a face. “How’s it spelled then, smart guy?”

Steve took the pencil and wrote it neatly on the margin. “A-n-t-i-e-t-a-m.”

“Show-off,” Bucky muttered, grinning.

Steve’s grin widened. “Guilty as charged.”

The room was warm, filled with the smell of laundry soap, teenage boy scent, and the faint metallic tang of the radiator. Outside, a car honked, but it felt far away, like the world had shrunk down to just the two of them, their notes, and the sound of Steve tapping his finger against the paper.

Bucky bent forward again to grab the notebook, muttering the dates under his breath. Steve, however, had lost interest in the notebook entirely. He rested his chin in his hand, watching Bucky’s expression as he read, the way his lips moved slightly as he tried to memorize each fact.

“Stop starin’, Rogers,” Bucky said without looking up. “You’re making me forget when Gettysburg happened.”

“July 1st to 3rd, 1863,” Steve said automatically.

Bucky groaned, laughing. “You’re annoying.”

“I’m helpful,” Steve protested, eyes twinkling. “And maybe a little distracting.”

“Maybe?”

“Alright, definitely.”

Bucky shook his head but couldn’t stop smiling. “Fine. If you’re gonna sit there and act like a know-it-all, at least quiz me properly.”

Steve's eyebrow shot up in clear exasperation, a sharp exhale escaping his lips as if the very idea of focusing on history notes while Bucky lounged half-dressed on his bed was physically painful. "God, Buck-" He dragged a hand down his face, fingers catching against the warmth of flushed skin. "That’s so lame."

Bucky chuckled, giving him a light smack on the shoulder with the notebook before resting his hand on Steve’s waist. “What if I make you a deal?”

Steve perched atop Bucky’s lap with practiced nonchalance, but the second those words left the other boy’s mouth, his teasing grin faltered. A flicker of surprise widened his eyes. “A deal, huh? That never ends well for me.”

Bucky's smirk curled at the edges as he gestured downward to his dick, his voice dropping to a rough whisper. "C'mon, Rogers. Help me ace that dumb history exam," His hips shifted beneath Steve, emphasizing his offer. "And you get first-class access to the main attraction."

Steve laughed, shaking his head. “What? Main attraction? How desperate are we?”

Bucky's touch was warm and soft, fingers tracing patterns over the exposed skin under the shirt at the small of Steve's back as he pulled him closer. That lazy grin. God, he looked like a damn jerk, cocky and confident. But the casual reveal of neediness. It pulled Steve's lips into a smile of fond annoyance.

“Pretty desperate,” Bucky admitted with a grin. “History’s killing me, pal. I need motivation.”

“Define the term ‘access’,” Steve demanded, faking innocence with his ever-so-boyish little look.

Bucky let out a slow, exaggerated exhale, theatrically rolling his shoulders like some smug businessman securing a deal. His fingers danced along the dip of Steve's spine, tracing little circles just above the waistband of his pants.

"Alright, tough guy," he smiled, voice dipping into something playful and rough at the edges. "Terms are very negotiable." A flicker of mischief sparked in his eyes as he leaned in. "Ride it if you're feeling bold. Or get on your knees and make a mess if you'd rather skip the hard work." He thumbed over Steve's hip bone, grin widening. "Or… if you're feelin' real creative, lick it clean so I can skip the shower later back home."

Steve's laughter was bright, his eyes sparkling with mischief as he pretended to be in deep thought. His head tilted, lips pressed shut in a comically exaggerated consideration. But there was no hiding the genuine laughter in his voice as he leaned in, mock-overwhelmed by the 'choices'. "So many possibilities, Buck. How is little old me supposed to choose?"

Bucky's hand drifted downward, fingers sliding along Steve's spine before reaching out against the curve of his jaw. He tugged him down effortlessly, meeting him in a kiss that started slow but quickly deepened. His tongue slid against Steve. When Steve broke away for air, Bucky didn't let him go far. Just enough to see the flush on his cheeks before dragging him right back in with a possessive pull.

His teeth caught Steve's lower lip, tugging just enough to earn a soft noise from the blond before soothing it with another kiss, hot and lingering this time.

"Stevie?" Bucky's voice came out low, rough around the edges. His tongue licked slowly over Steve's kiss-swollen bottom lip before he finally let him pull back just an inch, fingertips still tracing the sharp line of his jaw.

Steve hummed in response, barely making a sound at all. His thighs tensed around Bucky's hips, where he sat. The movement made Bucky's breath hitch. Subtle, but enough that Steve felt it.

Bucky was all sprawled out on the mattress and perfectly content with the current arrangement. From this angle, it was easy to look up at Steve and admire just how damn handsome the boy was, all lean muscle and sharp bones beneath pale skin. He grinned again, gaze drifting meaningfully down to his own hips, then back to Steve's face.

"Try to ride it," he murmured.

Steve flushed instantly, cheeks burning pink as he wiped at his still-tingling lips with the back of his hand. "I- I haven't- I dunno-"

“Try.” Bucky cut him off, placing both his warm palms on each side of Steve’s waist. "Figure it out," he added teasingly, but his voice dipped into something softer then, almost encouraging. The notebook on his chest slid off with a careless shrug as he shifted to prop himself up on one elbow. "C’mon. Ain’t like I’ll let you mess it up."

Steve swallowed hard before huffing out an embarrassed little laugh. "How, genius?"

Bucky couldn’t help but chuckle at the innocence of his best friend. He didn’t judge, though. He never did.

"Alright, here's how this works," Bucky murmured, shifting Steve forward with practiced ease until their hips aligned just right. His hands lingered on the smaller boy's waist, not guiding now, just there, steadying him as Steve braced against the mattress.

Steve blinked down at him, fingers flexing against crumpled sheets. "...Then what?"

Bucky smirked up at him through his lashes. "You get me nice and ready first," His thumb brushed Steve’s hip bone. "Then I do the hard part." A beat. "Literally."

Steve’s breath hitched, "You push your dick in… and *I ride it*?"

Bucky had to bite back a chuckle at just how adorably flustered Steve looked. It always blew his mind how the smallest things could send the guy flushing like a goddamn cartoon character. He gave Steve’s waist a reassuring squeeze. “That’s right, pal. Means you bounce that little ass while I,” His free hand waved lazily toward the notes. “get academically enriched.”

Steve huffed, ears burning but lips twitching despite himself. “So you get to just- what? Lay there like some kinda pampered king?”

“Yup.” Bucky popped the ‘p’, grinning shamelessly.

Steve's eyes flickered with hesitation, uncertainty still lingering in his expression as he took in the words, then his expression twisted into a scowl. "You're gonna study while I do all the work?"

Bucky fought back a scoff at Steve's clueless tone, the question making his lips twitch up into a smirk. "Mhm," he nodded in agreement, "I take the lead most times. It’s your turn now."

Steve looked down at him, expression torn between skepticism and curiosity. "And this is supposed to be nice for me?"

A lazy shrug. "I'm sure it'll be pleasant enough." Bucky's hip shifted to nudge Steve teasingly. "You get to pick the pace."

"Mmhmm...." Steve hummed skeptically, eyes narrowing just a bit as he tried to figure out how much trouble he was actually getting into here. But Bucky's smirk was awfully smug and very convincing. "I get to take charge this time?"

"Sure," Bucky agreed lightly, almost too easily. "If you think you have the guts for it."

"I have the guts," Steve muttered stubbornly, his jaw set in a familiar way that meant he was already committed now. "I'm not a coward."

"Never said you were," Bucky chuckled, leaning back slightly on the pillow behind his head. "Show me what you've got, then. Be my guest."

Steve opened his mouth to respond, some snappy comeback, but all the pretending died when Bucky's hip nudged him pointedly again, this time hard enough to make his breath hitch.

Damn it.

He swallowed, eyes fixed on Bucky's face. "...Alright."

Bucky's fingers fumbled with his trousers under Steve's weight, cursing under his breath as it took him a few attempts to get the button undone. But his friend simply waited, perched above him with an air of amused skepticism.

"Little help, Rogers?" Bucky grunted.

Steve rolled his eyes but complied when he saw Bucky's hands struggling, lifting himself up on his knees to help pull the pants down. It was all familiar motions from then on. His fingers curled around the waistband before pushing the fabric past Bucky's hips.

Steve then lifted his own pants off with a sharp tug while keeping his

gaze fixed on Bucky's face. Something about the situation felt both ridiculous and absurdly natural, with Steve perched on Bucky's thigh like he was, and two pairs of pants now pooled on the floor.

"Still got the vaseline in the nightstand," Steve murmured, nodding toward the drawer.

Bucky reached past Steve with practiced ease, careful not to knock Steve off his lap as he grabbed the familiar blue tin. The Vaseline was nearly half-used by now. He remembered buying it months ago at the drugstore, making some dumb joke about "dry lips" loud enough for the guy at the checkout to hear while giving Steve that look. The one that meant they both knew exactly what they'd really be using it for. Back when everything was new and awkward, and Bucky had spent too many secret makeout sessions figuring out how to make sex good for Steve, how to ease that pinched expression of pain.

And now...well. They'd gotten a bit more comfortable with each other, that was for sure.

He popped open the lid with his thumb, glancing up at Steve as he swirled a finger through it lazily. "Want me to do the honors?"

Steve shifted without needing to be told, presenting his butt with an ease that came from knowing the routine by now. Bucky huffed a quiet laugh through his nose. God, the casual intimacy of it still sent warmth curling through his chest even now.

Bucky scooped out a generous glob, letting it warm between his fingers before pressing two slick fingers against Steve’s hole. His other hand was placed on the side of Steve’s waist, both steadying him and appreciating the way muscles tensed under his palm at the first finger pushing into his asshole.

He worked slowly at first. One knuckle-deep curl that made Steve suck in a sharp breath through his teeth, then another as flesh gave way to patient insistence. Bucky crooked his fingers just so, stretching him wider until Steve’s gasps turned uneven.

Steve breathed through the stretch, familiar now with the discomfort that came from this part of the process. It was never quite pleasant, but he'd gotten better at relaxing into it, learning to breathe past that initial tension as his body adjusted. He focused on that, the steady inhale and exhale, until the press of Bucky's fingers shifted from uncomfortable to something less sharp.

"All good now," Bucky declared, pulling out his fingers and giving a light smack to Steve's ass just for the hell of it.

Steve threw a half-hearted glare over his shoulder before turning back to Bucky, reaching for the tin of Vaseline once he was settled. Steve smiled, gaze wandering slowly over his friend's frame. Muscle flexing with each movement, hair tousled as usual.

“Hold still.” Steve gripped his dick, spreading the Vaseline in slow strokes along the shaft. The slick warmth of it made Bucky’s breath catch audibly. His thumb swiped over the tip, making Bucky twitch.

Bucky’s fingers dug into the sheets as he tipped his head back against the mattress. “Harder,” he mumbled, voice already rough at the edges.

Steve obeyed instantly, tightening his grip and quickening his pace, watching with quiet satisfaction as Bucky’s thighs tensed under him. He kept his grip tight, moving more purposefully now as he felt Bucky’s dick grow harder under his touch. The sound of his breath and the faintest creak of the bed frame were oddly loud in the otherwise quiet room.

He glanced up at Bucky now, taking in the way the other boy's mouth dropped open. A sharp intake of breath through parted lips.

"You look cute like that," Steve chuckled before glancing back down again, cupped hand rubbing the hardened dick.

Bucky made a noise that was half groan, half moan as he leaned forward to grab Steve by the hips again, pulling him more snugly onto his lap. Steve leaned back to let himself be manhandled, watching carefully as Bucky sat him down on his dick.

"C’mon," Bucky whispered, fingers flexing briefly on Steve's waist. "Be good and ride me."

Steve gasped as Bucky's cock pressed against his ass. A hard, heated pressure that made his thighs instinctively tense. He arched just slightly, adjusting until the head caught where it needed to.

Then…

"Oh-!" The moan punched out of him before he could bite it back as Bucky pushed in, slow but relentless.

Bucky exhaled shakily through clenched teeth, his hips twitching up

once he was fully inside Steve's hole. His fingers searched across the rumpled sheets until they found the discarded history notes. They had apparently fallen off Bucky's chest at some point, not that either of them noticed or really cared.

"Fuck," he managed to say, voice already raspy as he shoved the page toward Steve with trembling fingers. "Quiz me."

Steve perked up, grabbing the notes and clearing his throat. "Okay, who was the commanding general of the Union Army by the end of the war?"

"Ulysses S. Grant," Bucky gasped out, fingers digging into Steve's hips as he struggled to focus. His breath hitched when Steve shifted slightly, just enough to make his thighs tremble.

"Good," Steve murmured, voice low and teasing despite how flushed he was, chest rising fast, lips parted. "And who led the Confederacy?"

Bucky groaned as another small roll of Steve's hips threatened to short-circuit his brain entirely. "Ah, fuck- Robert E. Lee," he gritted out, his fingertips leaving red marks on Steve's tender waist.

Steve smirked down at him, all satisfied, even as sweat beaded along his own collarbones. "See? You're doing fine without me motivating you."

"Yeah, real fucking hilarious," Bucky managed between clenched teeth. "You gotta move, Stevie."

Steve barked a laugh that dissolved into a gasp when he finally moved properly. A slow drag upward left them both shuddering before sinking back down.

"Again. C'mon, Steve."

Steve's breath hitched as he lifted himself, just enough to make Bucky's cock slide halfway out before sinking back down in one smooth motion. The slap of their bodies made them both shudder, Steve's thighs trembling with the effort while Bucky's hands wandered greedily over his hips.

"Y-Yeah," Bucky stuttered between heavy breaths, "like that." His fingers dug into Steve's waist as if to guide him, an unspoken demand for more.

But Steve bit his lip and slowed down, focusing on reading the notes written in Bucky's messy handwriting. "Who," he murmured breathlessly, "won at Gettysburg?"

"Union," Bucky gritted out through clenched teeth, arching off the mattress when Steve finally gave him that first proper thrust. "Pickett's Charge- *fuck, Stevie*- failed July third."

Steve rewarded him with another deep thrust before pausing just to read the notes again. "Good boy."

"Move. Keep moving."

Steve smirked as he slowed down again, just to watch Bucky's fingers dig into the sheets again. "Impatient," he teased, voice dripping with amusement.

Bucky exhaled sharply through his nose, resisting the urge to flip them and ruin Steve's little game. "Quiz me then," he gritted out instead.

Steve offered another thrust of his hips before speaking, "Which side wore gray?"

"Confederates," Bucky shot back instantly, barely keeping himself from thrusting upward when Steve clenched around him on purpose.

"And blue?"

"Union," Bucky bit out, then groaned as Steve finally started moving properly again, each slick slide punching a breath from his lungs.

"There you go," Steve murmured smugly between gasps of his own. "Wasn't so hard...to focus, was it?"

Bucky shot him a half-hearted glare just to make a point, because it had been hard to focus, damn it. Steve knew exactly what he was doing. Purposefully frying what was left of Bucky's brain. Every move, every thrust had his self-control vanishing faster than he could put it back together again. And of course, Steve was smug about it.

Bucky gritted his teeth and moved his hip up just to hear the way it punched a gasp out of Steve when he pushed in all the way. "Sh-Shut up, Steve. Just keep moving."

"You shut up," Steve shot back between breaths, thighs shaking when Bucky's hips pushed up to meet him. He leaned down to press a

teasing kiss to the base of his throat, feeling his friend's pulse go crazy under his lips. "I'm educating you. Gotta fill that brain of yours."

"Think I can think fine," Bucky muttered. "Can think of better things to fill-"

Steve slapped a hand over Bucky's mouth before the words could finish, lowering his ass again before pushing up. "Nuh-uh. Quiz time. Name two battles the Confederates won."

Bucky's response turned into a muffled "agh- fuck-" against Steve's hand. It was hard to focus with Steve squeezing around his dick like this. Hard to do anything besides moan and try to keep his damn brain cells in order.

Steve removed his hand after a moment, fingers tracing patterns across Bucky's chest. "Answer me."

Bucky exhaled shakily, blinking up at the ceiling to try and regain his knowledge, or what was left of it when Steve was riding his goddamn lap. He took a minute to get his breathing under control, then finally forced his eyes back to Steve's face. "Bulls run one and two," he managed. "Chancellorsville."

Steve's lips curled in a smirk, his own breathing still labored but more steady now. "There you go. You even named three."

Bucky bit back the urge to roll his eyes at the teasing praise. God, how the hell did Steve manage to keep talking when all Bucky could do was feel? It was almost unfair.

"Told you I'm studying," he retorted anyway, fingers flexing absently against Steve's thighs. "Just not real good at focusing on history when something way more pleasant is happening."

Steve shifted his weight just enough to make Bucky gasp, lips curling in satisfaction. "Lincoln's big moment. Emancipation Proclamation, what year?" His hips rolled slowly.

Bucky swallowed hard, fingers digging into Steve's waist as he fought to form thoughts together. "Eighteen sixty... two?"

The blond arched a brow and let out a soft *tsk*, grinding down in quick movement. "Close. January first, eighteen sixty-three."

Bucky groaned at the correction, head thudding back against the

mattress with frustration. "I was close!" His hips twitched upward helplessly.

Steve chuckled at the silly protest. "Close doesn't pass the test," he murmured before wiggling his hips lightly to have Bucky's cock slide in even deeper.

The movement knocked an undignified yelp out of Bucky in response.

"Alright, smart guy. What was the Emancipation Proclamation, and why did Lincoln issue it?" His fingers traced patterns over Bucky's sweat-slick chest again as if it helped Steve regulate himself.

Bucky's hips trembled, half frustration, half desperation, before he forced himself still with a growl. "Fuck, Stevie!" He exhaled sharply through clenched teeth before collecting his thoughts. "It- *ah*- it freed slaves in rebelling states," he managed between ragged breaths. "Not everywhere yet, but... shit, keep moving-" A weak thrust followed before Steve's weight held him down again mercilessly.

Steve rewarded him with another slow roll of his hips, just enough to make Bucky whimper before pressing further, "And why?"

Bucky groaned like this was literal torture. Maybe it was. "War measure," he bit out desperately as Steve tightened around him. "To weaken the Confederacy and- *fuck!*- be able to recruit black men for the army." He slapped at Steve's thigh weakly when the blond just smirked instead of speeding up properly.

Steve's fingers had just picked the crumpled history notes up again when Bucky suddenly grabbed his wrist. Not roughly, but with a desperation that made Steve pause. The paper crinkled between them, forgotten as Bucky's other hand slid around his waist, anchoring him in place.

"Enough," Bucky whispered, pupils blown wide. His grip tightened almost pleadingly. "C'mon, Stevie. Let me finish."

And Steve could've teased him further. Could've made him gasp out another fact about Sherman's March or whatever else was scribbled on those damn papers, but instead he just exhaled a laugh and gave in. Because this wasn't some power play for him. It was clumsy curiosity, testing unfamiliar ground under the safety of Bucky's guidance. His first time playing the top.

So he let go of the notes entirely and let Bucky take over, his hands

tightening more around his hips to set a pace that was to his liking. And when Steve finally melted into it with no resistance? That alone drew a moan from Bucky's throat like that was all he'd really wanted from the start.

The rhythm between them turned more hurried quickly. Bucky’s grip on Steve’s hips tightened as he guided him faster, his breath coming in bursts. The bed creaked beneath them, the sound mixing with their gasps and the disgusting sound of skin slapping against skin.

Steve could feel it coming. The way Bucky’s thrusts turned uneven, desperate, and when Bucky groaned low in his throat, voice breaking as he choked out a “Close”. Steve didn’t hesitate. He moved his hips harder, meeting each jerky movement with a deep grind that made Bucky swear under his breath.

It wasn't long before Bucky's hands clenched bruisingly around Steve's waist, his whole body tensing under Steve. "Goddamn it, Stevie-" His back arched off the mattress as he finally tipped over that edge with a gasp, pulling Steve down against him hard enough to make the boy yelp.

It was moments before either of them could catch their breath. Bucky’s heart pounded wildly in his chest as he pulled out while Steve slumped against him in exhaustion, face buried in his shoulder to breathe out unsteady laughs. Bucky's fingers ran gently through Steve's sweat-damp hair, both of them trembling through the aftermath.

Finally, Bucky spoke, his voice more exhausted than cocky now. "History tests are not a turn-on," he muttered. "Too many damn dates."

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

This one is a little freaky, but well... it's also insanely cute.

Thursday, May 17th, 1940 - 35 days left

Bucky had kicked the door shut behind him and flopped onto his queen-sized bed, radio low on the nightstand, some crooner's voice drifting through the crackle of static. The curtains were open, afternoon light cutting the room across the floorboards. He sat cross-legged right in the middle of the bed, still in his school clothes. Black slacks rolled a little at the ankle, his white button-down untucked, and sleeves shoved up to his elbows. His tie was loosened, hanging half off, collar open enough to show the chain he sometimes wore tucked under his shirt.

His hair fell into his face, freshly combed but already disobedient, the kind that begged fingers through it. He looked good. Annoyingly good for someone who was supposed to be sulking. Pink lips, the faint shadow of a healing cut at the corner, lashes dark when he blinked slowly at the boy pacing his room like a madman.

Steve, red in the face and restless, walked back and forth at the foot of the bed, one hand rubbing the back of his neck. His tie was already off, stuffed in his pocket, and his suspenders hung loose against his hips.

"You're gonna wear a hole in my floor, pal," Bucky said lazily, head tipped to the side, watching him with those blue eyes that always carried too much weight.

"I'm thinkin'," Steve muttered, serious as ever.

"Yeah, I can see that. Smells like burnin' wires in here," Bucky teased, smirking.

Steve shot him a look but kept pacing, muttering under his breath. "There's gotta be a way. Somethin' that'll work. You just- you won't believe me unless we try."

Bucky rolled his eyes and leaned back on his hands, legs stretching out, socked feet brushing the bedcover. "Steve, you're ridiculous. I

told you, this ain't somethin' you can fix with elbow grease and big ideas."

Steve ignored him. He stopped suddenly, eyes lighting up with a kind of determination. "What if…" He hesitated, then blurted, "What if I use one of those magazines?"

Bucky's brows shot up. "…You're not touchin' those."

"No, no, listen!" Steve started pacing again, words tumbling over themselves. "Not like that. I mean- I could cut out one of the faces, right? One of the girls you're supposed to… y'know. And then I could hold it up, put it over mine." He gestured with both hands, miming holding a cut-out against his face. "So it's her. But it's me."

For a moment, there was silence, only the radio filling the void.

Then Bucky barked out a laugh so sudden he had to clutch a hand to his stomach. "You're kiddin' me." He wiped a hand down his face, still laughing. "Steve, that's the dumbest thing I ever heard in my life."

"I'm serious!" Steve said, cheeks burning, but his jaw set, like he was ready to fight for this weird plan. "You said it yourself. You can't make it work with them, but maybe if it's me helpin'... with her face, I dunno, maybe it'll trick your head into-"

"Into what?" Bucky cut in, doubtful. "Into suddenly likin' girls? Because you're standin' there with some poor pin-up's head taped to yours?" He shook his head, still grinning. "Christ, you're insane."

Steve didn't laugh, though. He looked stubborn. "I promised I'd help. You think you're broken, Buck, but you're not. You just- you gotta see it. You trust me, don't you?"

Bucky's smile faded at that, something softer creeping into his expression. He sat up straighter, elbows on his knees, studying the boy in front of him. Steve was dead serious, pacing his floor with this half-baked idea like it was the cure for all of Bucky's problems. And maybe it was ridiculous. Hell, it was ridiculous. But the fact that Steve cared enough to come up with it, to try… that sat heavy in his chest.

"You're really somethin', Rogers," Bucky said finally, voice lower, fond almost against his will. "I don't know if it's brave or just plain stupid."

"Probably both," Steve admitted, scratching at his neck.

Bucky sighed, flopping back onto the bed, one arm draped over his eyes. “Alright, fine. You can show me your little arts and crafts project. But if my ma finds scraps of naked ladies in the trash, I’m blamin’ you.”

That made Steve grin, relief softening his features. He moved closer to the bed, perched on the edge. “Deal.”

Bucky peeked at him from under his arm, lips twitching. “If this works, I swear to God.”

“We try,” Steve shot back, finally relaxing enough to smile for real.

Steve had that look in his eye again. All determined, a little reckless, like once he set his mind to something, there was no force in the world that could stop him. Bucky knew that look, had seen it a thousand times. Usually, it was right before Steve picked a fight with some guy twice his size. Today, it was about this ridiculous plan with scissors and a paper face.

Steve casually turned the little lock on Bucky’s bedroom door, like it was the most natural thing in the world. The click echoed louder than it should have in the quiet room. Bucky sat cross-legged on his bed, still watching him with skeptical amusement, one eyebrow raised high.

“You’re serious about this, huh?” Bucky asked, arms folded across his chest, trying to sound unimpressed even as heat threatened to creep up his neck.

“Dead serious,” Steve said, pacing again, hands working in the air as if he was sketching the idea. “Look, Buck, it doesn’t gotta mean anything crazy. Just… just try. For me. If it don’t work, fine. We drop it. But if it does…” He shrugged, hope in his eyes.

Bucky groaned, tipping his head back against the headboard. “You’re killin’ me, Rogers. You know that?”

“You trust me, don’t you?” Steve pressed, stepping closer to the bed.

Bucky sighed. That damn line again. And of course he did. He trusted Steve more than anyone in the world. Enough to let him into this ugly little corner of himself, the one he never showed anyone. Enough to let him push and poke where it hurt. And maybe, just maybe, Steve wasn’t entirely wrong.

“Fine,” Bucky muttered, voice low, ears burning. He shifted, reaching down and fishing under his bed. His fingers curled around the familiar edge of a shoebox shoved way back against the wall. Pulling it out felt like dragging some secret sin into the light. He set it on the blanket between them, not meeting Steve’s eyes.

Steve blinked, tilting his head. “What’s that?”

Bucky shot him a look. “Don’t act innocent. You wanted this. This is… it.”

Steve’s eyes widened as Bucky lifted the lid. Inside was a small stack of magazines, worn at the edges, some covers bent from being shoved in and out in a hurry. Glossy pages filled with half-dressed women, all pin-up smiles and soft curls. They looked almost unreal, Bucky thought. Like porcelain dolls pretending to be people.

His cheeks flushed red as he pushed the box closer to Steve, jaw tight. “Most of these- most of ’em I didn’t even buy. Joey and the guys passed ’em around. I just-” He sighed, running a hand over his face, embarrassed. “Hell, I dunno why I even kept ’em. Nothin’ works anyway.”

Steve didn’t laugh. Didn’t smirk. He just sat down on the edge of the bed, gentle, like he was stepping into sacred territory. He glanced down at the box, then back at Bucky. “Buck… It’s fine. Really. You don’t gotta explain.”

“Yeah, well, I feel like I do,” Bucky muttered, fiddling with the hem of his sleeve. “Feels pathetic sittin’ here showin’ you this junk. Like I’m some kid who don’t know what he’s doin’.”

“You’re not pathetic,” Steve said firmly, hand brushing against Bucky’s knee, grounding him. “Not to me.”

Bucky finally looked at him, heat in his face, heart thumping loud enough he swore Steve could hear it. For all his posing, for all his charm, right then, he felt small. Like a boy caught doing something he shouldn’t, holding it in his hands for his best friend to see.

Steve didn’t judge, though. He just looked back, eyes soft, steady. Like he meant it when he said Bucky wasn’t pathetic.

Bucky huffed, dragging the box into his lap. “Alright, fine. Which one do you wanna ruin first, huh?” His smirk didn’t quite hide the nervous twitch of his mouth, but it was enough to cover the way his hands

trembled as he flipped the first magazine open.

Steve was already on his feet again, rummaging through the clutter of Bucky's desk like a man on a mission. He came back with a beat-up pair of scissors and an old string of cord that looked like it used to hold together a pile of letters a decade ago.

"Alright," Steve said, setting his haul down next to the shoebox of magazines, "here's what we're gonna do. We cut out a face. Just the face, and then I'll tie the cord, make a little loop, and I'll put it in front of my face. Like a mask. Easy."

Bucky leaned back against the headboard, arms folded, one knee up, watching with deep suspicion. His blue eyes narrowed, half amused, half embarrassed.

"Steve," he said slowly, "that's still the dumbest thing I've ever heard in my life."

Steve snipped the scissors in the air once, grinning like an idiot. "Yeah, but dumb things sometimes work. You'll see."

Bucky dragged his palm down his face with a groan, muttering something under his breath. His heart pounded in his chest like he'd just run laps in PE. He wasn't used to this. Being on the defensive, the shy one. Usually, he was the one steering things, smooth and in control. But right now? Sitting shirt-clad on his bed while Steve prepared to turn himself into some kinda makeshift pin-up girl? He felt like his skin was too tight for his body.

Steve flipped through the stack of magazines, frowning in concentration like he was studying for an exam. "Alright, let's see. We need one with a good close-up. No shadows. Someone smiling, maybe. Friendly."

Bucky's cheeks flushed. He snatched the box back for a second. "You're not pickin' the ugliest dame in here just to mess with me."

Steve looked over his shoulder, pretending to be offended. "I'd never."

"You would."

"Maybe." Steve's grin widened.

Bucky groaned again, but let him have the box back. He couldn't look directly at the pages, not with Steve flipping through them so casually,

like it was nothing. To Bucky, it wasn't nothing. It was years of shame stuffed into a shoebox, proof that he was broken. And now his best friend, his everything, was slicing it up with scissors like it was craft hour.

Finally, Steve landed on a page, tapping the glossy paper. "This one. Look. Good lighting, nice smile, doesn't look too fake. Perfect candidate."

He started cutting carefully, tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth. Bucky sat frozen, ears burning, hands twisting in his lap. He hated this. Hated how vulnerable he felt, like he was twelve again, caught with something he wasn't supposed to have. He hated how much it mattered, how much he wanted this stupid experiment to work because Steve wanted it so badly.

"You're red as a tomato," Steve said without looking up, snipping away.

"Shut up," Bucky muttered, sinking lower against the headboard.

"I'm serious, Buck. You're never shy. It's kinda… cute."

Bucky's stomach flipped. "Don't call me cute while you're makin' a mask outta some poor girl's face, Stevie."

Steve chuckled. "Fine, fine. Handsome. Better?"

"Not really."

He tried to sound annoyed, but the truth was he was melting under Steve's attention. He hated being shy, hated feeling small, but there was something about the way Steve teased so gently. As if he saw right through Bucky's walls and didn't mind what was underneath.

Steve held up the cut-out proudly, a paper oval with a pair of big painted eyes and a wide lipstick smile. "Voilà."

Bucky squinted at it, deadpan. "…She looks like a ghost."

Steve tied the cord through two little holes and looped it around his ears, the paper face dangling over his own. "Boo," he said, muffled.

Bucky burst out laughing, a sudden, helpless laugh that shook his shoulders. He pressed his hand over his mouth, embarrassed by how good it felt. "You look like a damn fool."

“Good fool or bad fool?”

“Both.” Bucky hid his face in his palm, still chuckling, though underneath the laughter, his chest felt tight, his insecurities pressing in. What if this didn’t work? What if Steve finally saw what he’d always feared? That something was broken in him that couldn’t be fixed?

Steve pulled the mask slightly to the side so one of his eyes peeked through. “Hey. You trust me, right?”

Bucky’s smile vanished, his throat tight. “Yeah. More than anyone.”

“Then let me try,” Steve said softly.

Bucky swallowed hard, cheeks flushed, hands clenching the blanket. For once in his life, he didn’t have a slick answer. He just nodded, shy and vulnerable in a way he never let anyone else see.

The shoebox sat discarded at the foot of the bed, the cut-out face looped to Steve’s head by that old bit of cord. He was grinning beneath it, though the paper smile looked much wider and stranger than his own.

“Alright,” Steve said, tugging at the edges of the mask to straighten it. “We’ll call her… Mary. Simple name. Mary’s friendly, wholesome, the kind of girl your ma would let through the door.”

Bucky raised his brows, lips twitching despite himself. “Mary, huh? She looks more like a Martha to me.”

Steve chuckled, voice muffled by the paper. “Don’t ruin it already, Buck. You gotta play along.”

Bucky leaned back against the headboard, the queen-sized mattress dipping under him. His cheeks were hot, his stomach in knots. He’d fought in back alleys, stared down his father’s rage more times than he could count, but this? This made him nervous in a way none of that ever did.

Steve knelt at the side of the bed, fiddling nervously with the buttons of his shirt. “So… uh. Mary says she thinks you’re real handsome,” he said, making the paper lips bob as he spoke. “She says she’s been waiting for you to notice her.”

Bucky snorted softly, shaking his head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe. But I mean it,” Steve answered, quieter now, his real voice slipping through. He shrugged out of his shirt, pale chest catching the warm light from the window. His ribs showed faintly, the curve of his collarbones sharp. “I want you to know you’re wanted, Buck. Even if it’s stupid. Even if it’s through Mary.”

Bucky swallowed hard, throat dry. His eyes traced Steve’s movements as he crawled up onto the mattress. Steve’s hands were clumsy at first, fumbling with the buttons of Bucky’s own shirt. His touch was careful, respectful, almost like he was afraid Bucky might get freaked out.

“You don’t gotta do this,” Bucky muttered, though his arms stayed loose at his sides, letting Steve work.

“I know,” Steve said simply. “But I want to.”

The shirt slid from Bucky’s shoulders, leaving his chest bare. Steve’s hand lingered a moment, fingertips brushing over a birthmark he’d traced yesterday, a touch so gentle it made Bucky’s heart ache.

Then Steve reached lower, tugging at Bucky’s belt. His fingers weren’t smooth like Bucky’s. No confidence, no practiced ease, but there was something steady about them. He was determined, even in his awkwardness.

Bucky exhaled through his nose, staring at the ceiling as his trousers came loose. He shifted to help Steve tug them down, kicking them off until he was left in nothing but his shorts. His whole body felt hot, tight. Shame and fear made his chest tighten. He hated that. Hated how Steve was giving so much, and he couldn’t even meet him halfway.

Steve slid in closer, the paper face tilting toward him again. “Mary thinks you look good like this,” he teased gently. “She says she’s glad it’s just the two of you.”

Bucky let out a shaky laugh, hiding his face in his hand. “You’re insane.”

“Yeah,” Steve agreed. He pressed a kiss to Bucky’s temple, mask brushing clumsily against his hair. “But I love you.”

The words hit harder than anything else. Bucky closed his eyes, chest tightening, his insecurities screaming in his head. *Broken, wrong, not enough.* And yet here Steve was, shirt off, face hidden behind a paper mask, trying to carry the weight of Bucky’s shame like it didn’t scare

him at all.

Steve leaned back slightly, guiding Bucky down onto the mattress. “C’mon,” he said softly, “just lean back. Don’t think so hard.”

Bucky obeyed, folding under the gentleness of it. He lay flat on the bed, staring up at Steve, who straddled his hips like he was balancing on a horse. Cowboy position, clumsy but sure. Steve set his hands on either side of Bucky’s chest, steadying himself.

The mask slipped a little, the paper face dangling crookedly. Steve huffed a laugh and adjusted it. “Mary’s nervous too, y’know,” he whispered.

Bucky almost smiled, but the ache inside him was too heavy. His eyes softened anyway, watching Steve’s every move. Steve wasn’t polished, wasn’t smooth, but he was trying. Trying so damn hard just to make him feel whole.

And for a second, despite all the noise in his head, Bucky felt it. Felt like maybe he wasn’t broken beyond repair.

Wednesday Noon, June 1931- Bucky’s backyard

The summer of 1931 was hot, and the Barnes’ backyard had become a kingdom for two eight-year-olds. They’d dragged out a pile of old blankets and towels Bucky’s mom said she didn’t need anymore, balanced sticks like walls, and clipped the corners together with laundry pins stolen from the line. To them, it was a fortress. Half castle, half pirate ship, with Bucky insisting it was both at once and Steve not daring to argue.

Inside, the air smelled of sun-warmed fabric and grass. Bucky sprawled on his stomach, kicking his bare feet behind him, while Steve sat cross-legged, sketching crooked stars in the dirt with a stick.

“You know,” Steve chirped up suddenly, pushing his hair out of his eyes, “my ma says I don’t gotta worry about girls yet. Says I’m too little.”

Bucky rolled onto his side, frowning thoughtfully. “Too little for girls? That don’t make sense. You’re s’posed to… y’know, bring ‘em flowers, and open doors, and stuff.” He sat up, puffing out his chest in the way he’d seen his dad do. “That’s what bein’ a gentleman means. My ma told me.”

Steve wrinkled his nose. “Flowers just die anyway.”

Bucky laughed, shrugging his shoulder lightly. "Nah, it makes 'em smile. That's the point." Then, after a pause, he added, "I think I'll be good at it. Bein' nice to girls, I mean."

Steve tilted his head, curious but unconvinced. "You think so?"

"Yeah. I already practice. Holdin' doors. Helpin' Ma carry laundry. That's practice." Bucky grinned widely, showing the gap where he'd just lost a tooth.

For a while, they sat in the hush of their little hideout, listening to the cicadas drone. Then Bucky leaned closer, mischief bright in his eyes. "Hey. I was thinkin'. What if we practice… kissin'?"

Steve's mouth fell open. "What?"

Bucky shrugged, like it was the most ordinary idea in the world. "I mean, Ma kisses me goodnight. And she says kissin's for people you love. You're my best friend, ain't ya?"

Steve hesitated, cheeks turning pink. "But… boys don't kiss boys."

"Why not?" Bucky shot back. "Nobody'll know. S'just us. And if it's a secret, it don't count."

Steve chewed his lip, weighing it with all the seriousness an eight-year-old could muster. Then, shyly, he nodded. "Okay. But only once."

They leaned across the rumpled blankets, awkward and giggling. Their noses bumped first, making Steve laugh, but finally their lips touched, quick and clumsy. It wasn't anything like in the movies. It was just warm and strange, and they both pulled back with wide eyes.

"Well," Bucky said, scratching the back of his neck, "that's it, I guess."

Steve's grin was small but bright. "Didn't feel so bad."

Bucky smirked, as if he'd known it all along. "See? It's fine if we kiss. We're best pals. An' best pals are kinda like family."

"Then… it's our secret," Steve whispered, glancing toward the house.

"Our secret," Bucky agreed, pinky-swearing on it right then.

Outside their little fort, the world carried on. The neighborhood kids shouting in the street, Bucky's mother's radio crackling through the open window. Inside, the two boys lay back on the old towels, shoulders pressed

together. Bucky thought, in his simple child's way, that kissing was just something you did when you loved someone. And he did love Steve, even then.

Steve sat across Bucky's lap, awkward and determined, trying to make his ridiculous little plan work. His hands trembled a bit as he adjusted the cut-out face he'd tied clumsily with the cord over his own.

"Buck," Steve said softly, leaning in, "you gotta look at me. Look at Mary. Just try."

Bucky lay back against his pillows, his arms stretched out stiff beside him. His jaw was tense, eyes fixed on the ceiling as though he could ignore everything by staring at the crack running down the plaster.

"Steve," he muttered, voice low, "this is stupid." He sat up suddenly, pressing his hand against the paper mask and pushing it up until it crumpled onto Steve's forehead. "You're not her. You're you. It don't work like this."

Steve grabbed for it, trying to smooth it back down. "No. No, just trust me, okay? Maybe it'll help. Maybe it'll give you peace, Buck. If you can just prove it to yourself… you'll feel better. You'll do better. You'll stop worrying so much."

Bucky shook his head, frustration flashing in his eyes. "Steve, you don't get it. You still got this body. You still got that between your legs, not the other thing. You don't got… you don't got breasts, you don't talk like a girl, you don't look like one." His voice cracked, a bitter laugh slipping out. "It don't matter what paper face you tape on. You're not Mary. And I don't want Mary."

Steve froze, mouth opening just slightly. "…You don't?"

Bucky let out a shaky breath, his hand finding Steve's jaw, dragging the makeshift mask fully off his face, and tossing it aside. His thumb brushed against Steve's cheek almost without thinking. His eyes softened. "No, Steve. I want you, you dumbass."

Steve blinked, taken off guard by the bluntness. "Me?" His chest fluttered, equal parts warmth and disbelief.

"Yeah. You." Bucky leaned his head back, as if the confession cost him too much. "You're the only one who makes me forget… all of it. My

old man, school, mirrors, girls, I ain't never gonna like the way I'm supposed to. You're the only one who makes me… feel."

The silence hung between them, full of everything neither of them knew how to say. Steve placed his hands carefully against Bucky's shoulders, grounding them both. His voice was soft. "Then why'd you go along with this? Why'd you let me make an idiot out of myself with scissors and glue?"

A small, sheepish smile tugged at Bucky's mouth. "Because you were tryin' to help. And I don't… I don't deserve you goin' out of your way like that, but you did anyway. So thanks."

Steve's throat tightened. "You deserve it, Buck. You always do."

Bucky closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, a faraway look pulling at his features. "D'you remember when we were kids? That fort we built in my backyard?"

Steve's smile flickered at the memory. "With the towels and sticks? Yeah. Ma was so mad I came home covered in grass stains."

Bucky huffed out a small laugh. "That's where we first kissed."

Steve tilted his head. "…We did, didn't we?"

"Yeah." Bucky's eyes softened. "We said it was okay 'cause we were best friends. And we kept it a secret, 'cause secrets don't count. I told you kissing was for people you love." His voice dipped low. "And I loved you then. I still do. Even if I can't make sense of it."

Steve's chest ached with something both beautiful and sad. "I remember. But… we also promised each other we'd be real nice to girls. That we'd treat them right."

Bucky gave a small, bitter smile. "Yeah. We thought that in twenty years we'd both have pretty girlfriends. Jobs, houses, maybe wives. Maybe even kids running around."

Steve frowned, searching his best friend's face. "But… what about us?"

Bucky swallowed hard, eyes darting away. "It'll all fall in place, Steve. That's what everyone says. You grow up, you marry a girl, you have a family, and everything makes sense."

“But I don’t want it to fall in place like that,” Steve burst out, desperation creeping into his voice. He gripped Bucky’s wrist. “I want you. I don’t care if it don’t make sense to anyone else.”

Bucky shook his head, his voice rough. “We can’t. Not forever, Steve. You know that.”

Steve’s shoulders slumped. His heart felt like it was being tugged in two. “Then… what?”

Bucky hesitated, then managed a weak smile, trying to soften the weight in the room. “Then maybe we make a deal.”

“A deal?”

“Yeah.” Bucky exhaled slowly. “Someday, we’ll both have wives, families, the whole thing. But maybe… we still see each other. Maybe we keep this part secret. Like when we were kids. No one’s gotta know.”

Steve’s heart twisted. It wasn’t what he wanted. But it was something. His lips curved into a faint, sad smile. “A deal, then.”

Their foreheads touched, quiet and trembling, as the radio played on, and the room held their fragile little promise.

—

The room was heavy with summer night warmth, the kind that made the walls feel too close. Bucky lay on his back, tucked under the duvet, the radio now turned off. Silence pressed in on him, except for the faint creak of pipes and the noises coming from Becca’s in the next room. His parents’ voices were long gone. They went to bed not so long ago.

He stared at the ceiling. The familiar stain in the corner above his head looked almost like a map he could trace with his eyes. He should’ve been asleep. School was up again in the morning, another day of lessons and lunch break chatter. His mind, however, refused to settle.

It pulled him back. Always back. To the backyard fort when they were eight, when the world was small, and rules were simple. When a kiss didn’t feel like sin, just a secret. When he thought being a gentleman meant holding doors for girls, remembering flowers, and saying "yes ma’am" in a polite voice, because that’s what his mother had taught

him. Even then, he knew how to make girls giggle, how to stand just tall enough to seem confident. He'd practiced being that boy before he even understood what it meant.

And yet, what good had it done?

He thought of the girls he'd been with since. Hushed moments in shadowed corners, sweaty hands, heavy breaths. Most recently, Evie Novak. Her perfume, her lips, her laughter when she teased him. It should have meant something. It should have sparked a fire like the boys bragged about in the locker room. But when he replayed it now, stretched out in the quiet of his bed, it felt hollow. Nothing sparked when he remembered the times he was over at her house to make out with her. Nothing sparked when their lips met.

There was never any real feeling in it. Not the kind that mattered.

The kind he felt when Steve's laugh made him grin like an idiot. The way Steve looked, hunched over his sketches, a wrinkle between his brows as he drew, like the whole world was inside his pencil. Or the way Steve had sat across his lap earlier, stubborn and awkward, trying so hard to fix him. No girl had ever made his chest ache like that.

When Bucky tried to picture a wife, what his father expected, what his mother prayed for, his mind came up blank. No face stuck. No voice echoed. Just an empty space where a woman was supposed to be. But when he let himself think of Steve, really think of him, it was a life he could almost see clearly.

Coming home to Steve after a long day. A small apartment, Steve bent over a canvas, paint smudged across his hands. Dinner on the stove, warmth in the air. Bucky brought home money so Steve could live his dream of being an artist. That was a life. That was love.

His stomach ached with the weight of it. He turned onto his side, curling up tight, pressing the pillow to his chest. The thought was too big, too dangerous. He loved Steve. God help him, he did. But boys weren't supposed to love boys. That wasn't a future. That was a sin, a secret, a risk.

His throat tightened. He buried his face in the pillow and breathed deeply, as if he could get the desire out of himself.

"Can't be," he whispered into the dark. "It can't."

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

> Trigger warning for bodyshaming, physical and verbal abuse, and just George Barnes overall...

Friday, May 18th, 1940 - 34 days left

The morning light slanted in pale and cold through the kitchen window, glinting off the butter knife and catching the faint steam that rose from Bucky's mug of coffee. He sat hunched at the square table, still in his pajamas. Blue cotton bottoms with a random old undershirt. He hadn't bothered getting dressed yet, and his hair was sticking up in three different directions anyway. So why bother trying to look proper?

He'd shuffled down the stairs minutes ago, still rubbing sleep out of his eyes, and now he picked at a piece of toast smeared with jam and butter while the newspaper lay folded beside his plate.

His mother was at the counter, moving briskly but with a softness to her steps, her lips humming along to the crackly tune spilling from the radio on the windowsill. She was packing lunch bags. Sandwiches wrapped in wax paper, apples polished on her apron, a cookie tucked into Becca's. The smell of coffee mingled with the faint sweetness of strawberry jam and the starch of pressed shirts waiting in the hallway.

Bucky chewed slowly, still waking up, the words on the paper blurring when he tried to focus too hard. He liked these quiet minutes. His mom's voice so low and soothing, the clink of cutlery, the steady tick of the kitchen clock. He didn't expect the peace to last.

The creak of the stairs warned him, and sure enough, his father appeared in the doorway. George Barnes filled it like a shadow. His shirt was halfway buttoned, belt loose at his waist, socked feet padding heavy against the wood floor. His hair wasn't yet slicked back, giving him a rougher, more dangerous look. Most mornings, he was already out around this time. Not today, though. Bucky hadn't even bothered trying to remember why. All he knew was to stay out of the man's way.

He muttered something low to his wife about an appointment later in the day, about schedules and the Army office. She nodded, replying in

her gentle, even tone, but Bucky caught the flicker in her eyes, the way she measured his mood already, as if bracing for impact.

Then George's gaze slid sideways and landed on his son.

Bucky froze mid-bite, the toast halfway lifted, jam smearing his thumb. He knew that look.

Ugh, here it comes.

"You ever eat something decent in the morning?" George's voice cracked through the air, flat but sharp. "Toast and jam. Sugar and starch. No wonder you're getting fat."

The words hit like a slap.

Bucky blinked. He glanced down at himself immediately. Down at his lean frame, his pajamas hanging loose, the faint definition in his arms from practice he sometimes did with Mickey but had been neglecting lately, and running laps with the boys. He wasn't chubby. He knew he wasn't. But his father's voice made the toast in his stomach turn sour.

"George," his mother said quickly, without looking up from the sandwich she was wrapping, "he's fine. He's seventeen, is growing and developing still, he-"

"He eats like a kid," George cut in, adjusting his belt with a jerk of his hand. His eyes pinned Bucky relentlessly. "That's not what a man does. A man knows discipline. A man doesn't slouch down at breakfast with bedhead and jam on his hands like a child."

Bucky set the toast down on his plate, pulse climbing in his throat. He wasn't sure if it was better to defend himself or stay quiet. Every instinct told him silence was safer.

George's eyes narrowed, sliding from the plate back to his son's face, then to his hair. Of course, that sight triggered him the very second. Nothing new. "And for God's sake, that mop. You're going with me to the barber next time I go in. Sick of seeing you walk around looking like some street urchin. A Barnes supposed to look respectable."

Bucky shifted in his chair, shoulders tense, stomach curling. The toast cooled, the butter pooling against the plate. His appetite dissolved with every word.

"George," his mother tried again, her voice firmer now. "Leave him

be, he just got up. Let him finish his breakfast."

But George's attention didn't waver. His lip curled slightly, like he was looking at something he didn't quite respect.

Bucky stared at the table, jaw tight. He couldn't meet his father's eyes. His chest felt small, like it was shrinking inward.

The clock on the kitchen wall ticked loud enough that Bucky thought he could hear it in his bones. He swallowed down the lump in his throat, glanced once at his mother, then lowered his eyes to the newspaper as if that would shield him.

But the words came anyway.

George adjusted his shirt at last, tugging it into his pants neatly, and rounded on his son fully now, voice growing louder, more clipped. "I don't know how you expect to be a man if you can't even handle breakfast like one. And don't slouch like that. Look at yourself. Lazy posture, lazy habits. You've been putting on weight, I can see it."

Bucky's mother's head snapped up. "George, stop. He isn't-"

"I can see it," George barked.

Something cracked inside Bucky, soft but real. His voice slipped out before he could stop it. "What… what did I do this time? Huh? What did I do to make you so mad at me again?"

The room went even stiller. His mother froze mid-motion with a lunchbag, and George's head jerked a fraction, as though the question itself was an insult.

"What did you do?" his father repeated, voice low and dangerous, like the growl before the bite. Then it erupted, harsh and echoing in the small kitchen. "You walk around this house, eating, sleeping, never lifting a finger. You broke that mirror, and have you paid me back? No. Not even after I was kind enough to remind ya. Have you bothered to go find a small job, bring in something, anything? No. You think the world's going to hand you things, James?"

Bucky stiffened, pulse drumming. "I didn't-" he started, but his throat closed up. He swallowed hard and tried again. "I didn't know I was supposed to. I'm at school every day, I've got to study, I've got-"

"Excuses." George cut him off harshly. His voice was rising now,

volume climbing until it filled the walls. “You’re nearly a man grown, and all I see is a useless piece of trash who can’t even take responsibility for one broken mirror! You can’t even pay for the damage you cause in your own home!”

The words slammed into Bucky like stones. His vision blurred hot and sudden, tears stinging before he could blink them back. His body reacted before his mind did. He shoved back his chair, wooden legs screeching against the floor. His chest was tight, his face burning, and all he wanted was to get the hell out. Out of this fucking room, out of his father’s sight.

He turned toward the door, but before he could get two steps, his father’s hand shot out. Rough fingers clamped around his arm, hard enough to ache.

The grip yanked him back, Bucky’s breath caught. His bare feet slipped on the tile, and he stumbled, staring down at the hand pinning him in place. His heart hammered like a trapped bird.

His father’s face loomed close now, flushed and hard, voice a growl that echoed through the kitchen. “Don’t you dare walk away from me, boy.”

The kitchen, usually filled with the simple morning sounds of clinking dishes and the hum of the radio, had turned into a furnace. Bucky’s pulse thundered in his ears, every beat hot and painful. His father’s hand clamped on his arm, and when Bucky dared meet his eyes, he saw nothing soft there. Just rage. So much rage. Rage Bucky didn’t know how exactly he caused. He didn’t even do anything.

“Answer me when I’m talking to you!” George barked, shaking him once, sharp, like he was a ragdoll.

“I did- I didn’t know-” Bucky’s words faltered, his throat tight, and he hated how small his voice sounded, hated that it trembled.

“Don’t talk back to me!” George’s hand flew before Bucky even registered it. A sharp crack filled the room. His head whipped to the side, cheek burning hot where his father’s palm had landed.

“George!” Valeria’s voice broke, high and panicked. She darted closer, hands up like she could calm a firestorm with a touch. “Stop this, stop it now, he’s your son-”

But her husband’s anger only grew. “He’s no son of mine acting like

this. Lazy. Worthless. A disappointment. You think hiding behind your books and your friends makes you a man? You think those stupid nerd comics and being a fat fuck make you worth something?" His voice tore through the room, each word slicing deeper than the last. "You're nothing but a burden. A weak little boy who doesn't deserve the food on this table!"

Bucky froze where he stood. His eyes stung. His throat closed. He knew this place well. The place where his father's rage pressed down like a weight until fighting back felt impossible. He just stood there, tears burning their way down his cheeks, shame knotting tight in his stomach.

Another slap. This one was harder, snapping his head the other way. He staggered but caught himself on the doorframe. His jaw ached. His chest heaved. His legs trembled, but he forced them to keep carrying his weight. Apparently, too much weight.

"Stop it!" Valeria begged again, grabbing her husband's arm. "He's just a boy!"

George shoved her back roughly, and she stumbled against the counter with a gasp. She didn't come forward again. She just pressed her hands together like she was praying, tears threatening her own eyes.

The man's fury turned back to Bucky. His gaze landed on the untouched toast on the table. The simple slice with jam and butter that Bucky had been trying to eat minutes before. George snatched it up.

"You want to sit here, stuff your face while everyone else works hard?" he snarled. His hand moved before Bucky could react. The toast smeared across his son's cheek, sticky jam dragging through his hair, smudging red across his skin like war paint. The smell of sweetness turned sour, burning in Bucky's nose.

His father shoved the crumpled toast into Bucky's hand, pressing it hard into his palm. "Go on. Eat it. That's what you're good for, isn't it? Taking what you didn't earn. Useless boy. Eat it!"

Tears blurred Bucky's vision. His throat closed. But the grip on his arm was so firm, and his father's angry words were an obvious threat. Slowly, his hand shook as he raised the ruined toast. Jam smeared across his lips as he bit into it, his face sticky, humiliated, his tears rolling down hot. His chest felt hollow, like the words had stripped

him bare, left nothing but shame.

Valeria sobbed softly into her hands, but she didn't move again, didn't try to stop her husband now. Her voice was a whisper, hoarse and broken. *"Please, George… please."*

But George only stood taller, arms crossed, his chest heaving with fury like he'd just won a war.

And Bucky chewed. Silent, shaking, his dignity crumbling piece by piece.

—

It was one of those bright May afternoons that seemed to stretch forever, sunlight spilling over the schoolyard and catching the dust in the air. The grass still held a chill from the morning, but the wooden benches were already warm under the midday sun. The boys' table, half-shaded by the old oak at the edge of the yard, buzzed with lazy conversation. Talks about Saturday plans, Howard Stark's rumored party, and the latest gossip from gym class.

Bucky sat at the far end of the bench, elbows on the table, chin in his hand. His lunchbag sat unopened in front of him, the paper crumpled at the corners from being shoved hastily into his bag that morning. Across from him, Steve unwrapped a peanut butter sandwich that looked suspiciously homemade by Sarah Rogers herself, neat and packed with care. The opposite of how Bucky's morning had gone.

"Here," Bucky said suddenly, nudging his lunchbag across the table. His tone was casual, too casual. "Take mine. I'm not hungry."

Steve blinked, mid-bite, looking from the bag to his friend. "You're not eatin'? You didn't even have breakfast, did you?"

Bucky shrugged, eyes still somewhere far off, fixed on the row of seniors playing ball near the fence. "Had toast," he murmured. "Guess I just don't have much of an appetite."

Steve frowned, the way he always did when he was worried. Lines formed on his forehead, mouth tightening. "What's wrong with you lately? You've been all off since morning."

Bucky looked over then, finally meeting Steve's eyes. There was something in his gaze that flickered. Tiredness, maybe, or something deeper that he wasn't ready to say. So he forced a grin instead, the

kind he wore when he didn't want people to ask questions.

"My old man's just… y'know. One of his moods again." He waved his hand like he was swatting away a fly. "Probably just morning mad or somethin'. He'll be fine by tonight."

"Morning mad," Joey snorted from the other end of the table, mouth full of chips. "Wish I could use that excuse every time I yelled at my Ma."

Charlie laughed, clapping Joey's shoulder. "Yeah, except when you do it, you end up grounded."

The table chuckled, but Steve didn't. He kept his eyes on Bucky, who had leaned back now, stretching his arms behind his head like everything was perfectly normal.

"Anyway," Bucky said, smirking faintly, "guess I'm gettin' a haircut soon. Courtesy of my dad. Says it's gettin' too long… makes me look like some 'street bum.'" He exaggerated the phrase in a gruff imitation of his father, earning a few laughs.

"Oh no," Richie grinned, pretending to be scandalized. "Not the hair. Don't let him touch that, Barnes. The ladies'll cry."

Mickey nodded solemnly. "He's right. Your hair's got style, Buck. You chop it off, you'll lose your edge."

Bucky chuckled. The sound was thin, but it was there. He ran a hand through his hair, the soft brown strands catching the sunlight. "So what should I go for then, huh? Somethin' fancy? Maybe a buzzcut like yours back in 8th grade, Mickey?"

"Ha! You wouldn't last a day," Mickey shot back. "Too attached to that pretty-boy look."

"Yeah, probably," Bucky said, smiling, but there was no spark behind it. His voice dipped softly, almost distracted. "Guess he'll drag me there anyway."

Steve watched him carefully, the unease gnawing at his stomach. He'd seen that look before, the too-calm tone, the forced grin that never reached Bucky's eyes. Every time Bucky's father was mentioned, he shut down like that, folding into himself with a joke or a shrug.

"So he was in one of those moods again, huh?" Steve said quietly, his

tone steady but edged with concern.

Bucky didn't answer right away. He looked down at the table, tracing the grain of the wood with his thumb. "Yeah," he said at last, voice light but brittle. "Nothin' new." Then, before Steve could press, he tilted his head toward the rest of the group and changed the topic with his usual charm. "Anyway, are we goin' to that Stark party tomorrow or what? I need to know if I gotta look fancy or if Mickey's shorts are the new standard."

The boys erupted into banter again. Richie teasing Mickey about his obsession with weights, and Charlie talking about sneaking in booze from his brother's stash. Laughter rippled around the table, easy and carefree.

Only Steve stayed quiet. He took a slow bite from Bucky's sandwich, eyes flicking to his best friend's profile. The easy smile, the lazy lean, the quiet heaviness behind his posture. He didn't know what had happened that morning, not really. But he had a feeling it wasn't just "morning mad."

—

The bus rattled and groaned as it pulled away from the curb, the spring sun flashing through the windows in stripes of light. It smelled faintly of old leather and engine oil, and the chatter of students filled the air. Laughter, gossip, the thud of someone's satchel hitting the aisle floor.

Steve and Bucky had taken their usual spot, near the back, the two-seater beside the window. Bucky sat with one knee pulled up, elbow on the sill, eyes fixed on the passing streets of Brooklyn. His hair caught the afternoon light in soft brown glints, but his face was tired. The kind of tired that didn't come from a bad night's sleep, but from something heavier.

Steve sat beside him, arms crossed, quiet at first. He watched his friend's reflection in the glass for a while, the sharp line of his jaw. He waited, thinking maybe Bucky would say something on his own. But he didn't. So Steve finally exhaled and said, low, "You gonna tell me what happened this morning?"

Bucky didn't look at him. "Nothin' happened," he muttered, voice lazy but too even.

"Buck," Steve said again, softer now, "your dad- he's getting worse,

isn't he?"

Bucky's hand twitched where it rested on his knee. His eyes didn't move from the window. "Lower your voice," he hissed.

Steve leaned in slightly, his tone still gentle. "You didn't used to be scared of him, you know. Back when we were kids, you'd talk about him all proud. Said he was a war hero. Now…" He paused, catching the flicker of tension in Bucky's jaw. "Now you flinch when someone mentions his name."

Bucky turned his head at that, just slightly, blue eyes narrowing. "You're imaginin' things."

"I'm not," Steve said firmly. "You think I don't notice? The way you tense up every time he's brought up? Or how you won't let me come over some days 'cause he's home?"

"Stevie," Bucky interrupted, a tired smile tugging faintly at his mouth. "C'mon. Don't make a scene on the damn bus."

But Steve wasn't laughing. He leaned forward, voice low and tight. "He's hurting you, Buck. You don't have to say it, but I know. And I hate it. He's-"

"Shh!" Bucky hissed again, glancing toward the rows ahead. A few kids were talking loudly about the day, thankfully paying no attention to them. He slouched lower in his seat, muttering, "Would you quit it? You don't know what you're talkin' about."

"I know enough," Steve shot back, fists clenched on his knees. "I know he's destroying you."

That made Bucky turn, sharp and startled, the words landing like a slap. His mouth opened, but for a second, nothing came out. Then he gave a quiet, strained laugh. Humorless, brittle. "Destroyin' me? Really, Rogers?"

Steve didn't back down. "Yeah. He shames you, he hits you, he yells at you until you can't look him in the eye. He tells you what you're supposed to be, who you're supposed to be, like you don't get to choose. He pushed you outta painting back in middle school 'cause it wasn't 'manly.' He's trying to turn you into him. And that's not you, Buck."

Bucky stared at him, speechless. His throat bobbed, eyes flashing with

something between anger and panic. Finally, he said, “You don’t know him.”

“I know enough.”

“You don’t even have a damn father!” The words came out louder than intended, sharp enough that a few heads turned. Bucky winced, lowering his voice immediately. “You don’t know how it is, alright? So just drop it.”

Steve froze, stunned. Bucky’s tone wasn’t cruel. It was defensive, desperate even. He looked away again, out the window, blinking hard as the city rolled past in blurs of sunlight and brick walls. His hand gripped the seat so tightly his knuckles went white.

After a moment, his voice came quieter. “He’s just… pushin’ me, Steve. That’s all. Wants me in better shape. Said I’m gettin’ fat.”

Steve’s jaw tightened. “Fat?”

“Yeah,” Bucky mumbled. “Said I was eatin’ too much junk. He’s right. I should get back to workin’ out with Mickey like last summer. I was in shape then. Guess I let myself go a bit.”

Steve’s head snapped toward him. “You’re not serious.”

Bucky shrugged, still avoiding his gaze. “I mean… look at me.” He tugged lightly at his shirt, half-smiling in embarrassment. “I’ve got a little stomach goin’ on.”

“You’re fine the way you are,” Steve said, voice rising before he forced it back down. “You’re perfect, Buck. Don’t let that man get in your head.”

Bucky gave a short laugh that didn’t reach his eyes. “You’re biased.”

“I’m not,” Steve said, leaning closer. “He’s the one who’s wrong. Every time he opens his mouth, he’s tryin’ to break you down. And you- you keep tellin’ yourself it’s to make you better. But it’s not. He’s just-”

“Steve,” Bucky cut in sharply, turning to face him. His voice cracked slightly, but his expression hardened. “Enough.”

Steve hesitated, words stuck on his tongue.

Bucky stared him down, eyes wet around the edges, though he was fighting it hard. “You don’t understand. You never will. He’s my

father. I can't just-" He shook his head, gripping his thigh with one hand. "Drop it."

When Steve reached out, slow and careful, to rest his hand on Bucky's arm, Bucky swatted it away. Not roughly, but with finality. "I said drop it."

Silence. The bus rattled along the cobblestones, the sound of tires humming beneath them.

Steve swallowed hard, retreating into his seat, guilt heavy in his chest. He stared at his knees for a moment before murmuring, "You don't have to face him alone, y'know."

Bucky didn't respond. He just leaned back, jaw tight, eyes unfocused on the window. The city flashed by in a blur of people, storefronts, and afternoon light. But Bucky wasn't seeing any of it.

He was hearing his father's voice again, sharp and cold.

You're nearly a man grown, and all I see is a useless piece of trash who can't even take responsibility for one broken mirror.

The words clung like a stain he couldn't scrub off.

When the bus jolted to a stop, he exhaled quietly, like he'd been holding his breath the whole ride. "C'mon, Stevie," he said softly, forcing another smile. "I'll miss my stop."

Steve shifted beside him, his hand still resting on his knees. His stop wasn't for another block, but when Bucky got up, Steve stood too.

"Steve, you're-"

"Yeah, I know," Steve cut in. "But I'll get off here."

Bucky frowned, one hand gripping the metal seatback as the bus jolted slightly. "You don't gotta walk me home, pal."

"I know," Steve said again, his tone firm but gentle. "I want to."

Bucky sighed, the sound coming out like a laugh that forgot how to smile.

The bus doors hissed open. They stepped out together, into warm air and the smell of exhaust and bakery bread from the shop on the corner. The street was busy with kids walking home, a paperboy

shouting headlines, and cars rumbling past.

They started walking down the sidewalk, Steve falling into step beside him. For a few moments, neither spoke. Then Steve broke the silence.

“You’re not fat, you know,” he said softly.

Bucky gave a little snort. “Still on that?”

“I mean it,” Steve insisted, glancing at him. “You look fine. You’re- hell, you’re so handsome, Buck. Always have been.”

Bucky’s steps faltered. He rubbed the back of his neck, the tips of his ears pink. “You don’t gotta say that.”

“I’m not just saying it.”

Bucky sighed through his nose, his jaw tightening as he kept walking. “You don’t get it, Steve.”

“I get that your dad’s being awful,” Steve pressed. “And I hate seeing you take it. He- he doesn’t get to tear you down like that. You deserve better than that.”

“Deserve better?” Bucky repeated, a sharp edge creeping into his voice. He stopped walking, turning toward Steve, his blue eyes a little glassy again. “What do you even want me to say, huh? That you’re right? That he’s a jerk? Fine. He is. Everybody knows that. But what am I supposed to do about it?”

Steve opened his mouth, but Bucky kept going, his voice breaking just slightly. “You think I like it? You think I don’t try, Stevie? I try every damn day. I get up, I go to school, I smile, I keep my grades up, I help Ma when I can, I do every little thing that’s supposed to make him proud- and it’s never enough. Not once. So what do you want from me?”

Steve’s chest ached at the sound of it. The crack in his best friend’s voice, the pain barely held back by pride.

“Buck,” he said quietly, “I just want to help.”

Bucky laughed under his breath, shaking his head. “You can’t.”

“Yes, I can,” Steve said, stepping closer. “I can remind you you’re worth somethin’. That you don’t need to earn his approval. That you’re good the way you are-”

“Stop.”

The word came out hard but shaky. Bucky’s hand came up between them, trembling slightly. “Steve, I had a bad enough morning already, alright? I don’t need you pokin’ your nose into somethin’ you can’t fix.”

Steve blinked, stung but still calm. “I’m not trying to fix it-”

“Yeah, you are,” Bucky cut him off, voice suddenly tired again. “You always are. You think you can fix everythin’ with that big heart of yours. But some things, you just… you live with. You learn it.”

He forced a small, broken smile. “You learn to take it.”

Steve’s throat tightened. “That’s not right, Buck. You shouldn’t have to-”

“I don’t want your help,” Bucky said, softer now. The anger had drained from him, leaving something fragile behind. “You do enough just by likin’ me.”

He glanced down, then met Steve’s eyes again, and for a moment, the mask slipped completely. There was no grin, no sarcasm, no tough front. Just a boy who looked so tired of being hurt and still too proud to fall apart.

“You’re the best person I know,” Bucky murmured. “That’s enough.”

Steve’s heart felt like it cracked a little.

Bucky shoved his hands into his pockets, turning away before Steve could say anything else. “C’mon, Stevie. I’ll walk you to your stop. Don’t wanna make your Ma worry.”

Steve followed silently, watching the way Bucky’s shoulders were hunched slightly, how the light hit the side of his face. He wanted to grab him, to tell him that what he called “living with it” wasn’t living at all, but the look on Bucky’s face stopped him. There was something in it that said not now. Maybe not ever.

So instead, Steve just walked beside him until they reached the corner where their ways split.

“You gonna be okay?” Steve asked quietly.

Bucky smiled, tired but sincere. “Yeah,” he lied. “See you tomorrow,

Stevie."

He gave a mock salute before heading down the street, his shadow stretching long in the afternoon sun.

—

Steve sat at the table in his kitchen, chin resting on his folded arms. He was staring at the cluttered counter where his mother was working. Medicine bottles lined up neatly beside small labeled tins and rolls of tape. Sarah Rogers was humming softly, her sleeves rolled up, her hair pinned back in a loose bun. Her hands, steady and small, moved with a practiced rhythm.

She'd worked all day at the hospital, but she didn't show her weariness the way other people did. There was strength in her gentleness, something unshakable that Steve had always looked up to.

After a while, she looked up at him. "You've been quiet since you came home," she said, her hands busy sorting his medication. "You feelin' alright, sweetheart?"

Steve shrugged, eyes darting toward the bottles. "Just tired, Ma."

"Hmm." She capped one tin and reached for another. "You sure that's all it is?"

Her tone wasn't sharp. It never was, but it cut through his defenses all the same. Steve hesitated, picking at the wood grain on the table. She turned slightly, hands pausing, and gave him that look. The one that told him he didn't have to hide anything.

"Ma…" he started, voice small. "You can't tell anyone what I'm about to say, alright? Not Bucky, not anyone."

Sarah nodded immediately. "You have my word."

Steve took a deep breath, his chest tight. "It's about Bucky's dad."

Her brow furrowed, just slightly, but she didn't interrupt.

"He's…" Steve's throat worked. "He's bad to him. Worse than I thought."

Sarah didn't move. Just watched her son, her expression calm and soft.

"He said some things today," Steve went on, words tumbling faster now that he'd started. "Things about his dad yelling, about… callin' him fat. And he tried to brush it off, like it was normal, like it didn't matter. But it's not normal. It's not right, Ma. The way Bucky talks about it. Like he deserves it, or like his old man's just 'pushing him to be better.'"

His voice cracked a little at that, and he rubbed at his sleeve.

Sarah's hands had stilled completely now. She exhaled slowly, then sat down across from him, folding her hands on the table.

"George Barnes," she said quietly. Not a question.

Steve nodded.

"I always knew that man carried too much temper in him," she said after a moment. "Your father used to say the same, before…" She caught herself, shaking her head with a faint sigh. "Valeria tried to keep the peace, I'm sure of it. But that kind of anger doesn't stay quiet for long."

Steve looked up, startled. "You know about Mrs. Barnes' past?"

Sure, Steve knew pieces. The things Bucky mentioned sometimes, or the small, carefully chosen stories Valeria sometimes shared. But she guarded the rest of her past closely. Valeria had a way of smoothing over the edges of her own history, offering warmth and politeness instead of detail, as if the life she'd lived before Brooklyn was something delicate she preferred not to touch too often.

"Not well," she said gently. "But I know enough. Valeria came over to the hospital some years back. Volunteered with one of our campaigns. Smart woman. Kind. A bit… proud, maybe. She wanted to fit in. You know how people talk about the foreign women marrying the well-off and older American men."

She smiled faintly, but there was sadness behind it. "I've seen her with bruises, too, once or twice. Always covered up, always smiling. Some women learn how to pretend everything's fine because that's the only way they know to keep their family from falling apart."

Steve's stomach twisted. "You think he hits her, too?"

Sarah's eyes softened with something like sorrow. "I don't think, Stevie. I know the signs."

Silence settled between them for a moment, heavy but not cold. Sarah reached over and brushed her thumb gently across Steve's hand.

"I know it's hard to see your friend go through something like that," she said. "You want to fix it. You've always had that good heart in you. But there's only so much a boy of seventeen can do. You can't make a man like George Barnes change, not with words, not with fists, not with anything."

Steve's eyes burned. "So what? I just sit here while Bucky keeps getting hurt?"

"No," Sarah said softly. "You be there for him. You show him what kindness looks like. You remind him that he's loved, that someone in this world thinks he's worth something."

Her voice was calm but sure, and it steadied him.

"He'll need that," she continued, "more than anything. Because boys who grow up like that… they start to believe what they're told. They carry the shame like it's theirs to bear."

Steve swallowed hard, blinking down at the table. "He does that. He blames himself for everything. Says his dad's just trying to make him better."

Sarah sighed, leaning back slightly. "That's what happens when cruelty wears the mask of discipline. Makes it sound righteous. George Barnes… he's the kind of man who never learned how to be gentle, because he thought gentleness made him weak."

She paused, her gaze softening again. "Don't let that be you, Stevie."

Steve looked up, eyes shining. "Never."

"Good."

Sarah smiled faintly, then reached for one of the medicine tins and began labeling again, though her voice stayed low and thoughtful. "You know, Valeria loves that boy. I can see it in how she looks at him. But love doesn't always mean you can protect someone. Sometimes, it just means you're scared to make things worse."

Steve nodded slowly. "She's always nice. Packs him lunch, checks if he eats enough, even made me soup once when I was sick."

“That’s a mother trying to do what she can,” Sarah murmured. “Maybe she hopes if she keeps things peaceful, George won’t take it out on the children. But men like that? They always find a reason.”

The clock ticked, the smell of chamomile and medicine filling the room.

Steve leaned back, his chest aching with all the things he couldn’t fix. “He slept over last week,” he said quietly. “Said his dad was mad and he didn’t wanna go home. I thought it was just a fight. But now…”

Sarah looked up again, sighing. “You did right, letting him stay.”

“Did I?” Steve murmured. “Didn’t stop anything.”

“Maybe not,” she said softly, “but you gave him one night where he felt safe. Sometimes, that’s all a person needs to remember that safety exists.”

Steve looked at her, the weight of it all settling heavily on his shoulders. “I just wish I could do more.”

“You are,” she said, smiling gently. “You’re being his friend. That’s what you can do. And that matters, more than you know.”

Steve nodded, the tightness in his chest easing just slightly. He watched her return to her careful work of labeling, sorting, humming again, and thought, not for the first time, how lucky he was to have a mother like her.

“Thanks, Ma,” he said quietly.

Sarah smiled without looking up. “You’ll make it right, one way or another. You’ve got a good heart, Stevie. Don’t ever let this world take that from you.”

Chapter 29: Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

> Oh, here we go...
>
> Sorry for not uploading yesterday, but the plans have changed. I was working on later chapters and ended up making some huge changes because I have a habit of being criminally impulsive when ideas strike. New updates tomorrow, though! Also, you'll probably think I'm evil for ending today's update right there, and honestly… I might enjoy playing with your emotions just a tiny bit <3

Saturday, May 19th, 1940 - 33 days left

Howard Stark's family mansion was the kind of place that made you stop for a second before walking in, even when you tried not to show it.

It sat near the edge of Brooklyn Heights, grand and a little smug-looking, a white stone facade with tall columns and iron railings that glowed even in the sunset. The front yard was manicured, hedges clipped to perfection, a fountain in the center catching the light from the lanterns Howard's father must've imported from somewhere fancy. France, maybe. The driveway was packed with cars. Most didn't belong to students but to their parents, lending the whole thing a strange air of adultness, of something the kids weren't entirely supposed to be part of.

"Christ," Richie whistled low as the group reached the gate. "You think the guy owns half of New York already or just this block?"

"Knowing the Starks?" Joey said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "Probably both."

Bucky grinned, the cool kind of grin that made people think he'd been to parties like this before, though he hadn't. Not really. His hair was neat tonight, slicked back just enough, and he wore his nicest shirt with rolled sleeves, suspenders cutting a clean line down his chest. There was a twinkle in his eyes that said he was ready for trouble.

"C'mon, fellas," he said, nudging Steve forward. "Don't chicken out now."

Steve adjusted his collar and muttered, “I’m not chickenin’ out.”

He was, though. A little.

Steve Rogers still despised settings like this. Big parties? A bunch of people? None of it came remotely close to his idea of a fun evening.

The music hit them before they even reached the door. Some big band number pulsing through the walls, brass and bass and rhythm. Inside, the air was thick with perfume, tobacco smoke, and that warm, buzzing kind of laughter that only happens at parties where no one’s really watching the time.

A butler. An actual butler opened the front door, and Steve’s mouth nearly dropped open.

The entrance hall was two stories high, a chandelier spilling light across marble floors, mirrors gleaming along the walls. The crowd was a blur of suits, dresses, curls, red lips, and shiny shoes. Every few seconds, someone called a name, or shouted for another round, or burst into laughter that echoed under the high ceiling.

“Sweet mother,” Joey muttered. “You think he rented a ballroom or what?”

“Nope,” Bucky said, his hand running over his dark locks. “This is his ballroom.” He turned to Steve and gave him a grin that was half-teasing, half-gentle. “Loosen up, Stevie. You look like you just saw a ghost.”

Steve tugged self-consciously at his tie, which Bucky had knotted for him earlier. “Just don’t see why anyone’d throw a party like this for fun.”

“Because they can afford to,” Mickey said with a laugh, clapping him on the shoulder. “You’ll get used to it, pal.”

Bucky leaned in, fixing one of Steve’s suspenders with an easy tug. “There,” he said, his voice low enough that only Steve heard it. “Now you look like you belong.”

Steve’s ears went pink.

They barely had time to take in the staircase sweeping up to the second floor before Howard himself appeared. He looked as neat as ever, in a crisp white suit and slicked hair, a cigarette between his

fingers and a blonde clinging to his arm like a trophy.

“Barnes! Rogers!” he called, raising his drink. “You made it! About damn time!”

Bucky grinned. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world, Stark.”

Howard smirked, all teeth and confidence. “Good man. Drinks are in the parlor, band’s in the back, and if anyone breaks a vase, I’ll send them the bill.”

He winked and disappeared back into the crowd with the girl still attached to him.

Richie snorted. “Man’s a piece of work.”

“Man’s got too much money,” Bucky said lightly, though his eyes followed Howard for a moment, something doubtful flickering there before he shook it off. “C’mon, let’s find that bar.”

They drifted through the hall, dodging dancing couples and the occasional clink of glasses. The parlor was enormous, with couches pushed to the walls, a long polished bar at one end manned by someone who clearly wasn’t a student. The music was louder here, the saxophones brighter, a few kids from their school actually dancing in the middle of the room while others leaned close and whispered things meant to sound older than they were.

Bucky led the way, easy as ever, exchanging hellos and grins as if the whole mansion belonged to him, too. Steve followed closely, uncomfortable but trying not to show it. His eyes flicked everywhere, taking in the shine, the smell of expensive cologne, the slight chaos of it all.

He felt small here. Smaller than usual.

At the bar, Bucky ordered sodas for both of them, though Richie and Charlie wasted no time asking for something stronger, which made the Bartender shake his head with a grin as he slid them beers over.

And then came the girls.

Peggy Carter, in a fitted blue dress that made half the boys in the room lose their ability to form sentences. Dot, quieter, but smiling. Evie Novak, all golden curls and mischief. And beside them, Miriam Hale.

Oh.

Miriam had that kind of blondness that caught the light. Her smile was polite, but her eyes didn't linger on Bucky long. They didn't have to. There was history there, faint and awkward and still warm enough to make Bucky clear his throat before saying, "Hey, girls."

"Hey yourself," Peggy teased. "Didn't expect to see you here, Barnes. Thought you were too good for Stark's kind of party."

Bucky gave her a smirk. "Heard there'd be decent music. Figured I'd make an exception."

Evie laughed, and Miriam just crossed her arms loosely, tilting her head. "You still run track?" she asked. "Or did you give that up, too?"

Bucky chuckled. "Nah. Got boring. Why, you miss me running past you?"

Steve nearly choked on his soda.

Dot giggled behind her cup, and Miriam rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "He hasn't changed a bit."

"Wouldn't want me to," Bucky shot back, leaning casually against the bar.

It was playful, all of it, the kind of social dance Bucky did effortlessly. Steve, though, didn't know where to look. He stood there stiffly, his drink clutched in both hands, trying to nod or smile at the right times but mostly just wishing he could fade into the wall.

Joey elbowed him, whispering, "You look like you're attendin' a funeral, not a party."

"I don't know what to do," Steve muttered back.

"Just do what Bucky does."

Steve glanced toward Bucky, who was laughing now with Mickey. Bright and unbothered, blue eyes catching the low lamplight, grin dazzling as he told some ridiculous story about his glorious days when he worked out with Mickey almost every day. The girls laughed, and Steve couldn't help smiling, too.

He didn't understand how Bucky made it look so easy. How he could fill a room without even trying.

Bucky turned suddenly, catching his eye. “Stevie!” he called. “You gonna stand there lookin’ like a lost lamb or you gonna come meet everyone?”

Steve blushed, mumbling, “I’ve met ‘em.”

They were his friends, too, after all. Kind of.

Except for the few strangers who have joined the group at some point. Maybe classmates? Maybe just random people from their school, he wasn’t sure. Damn, Steve hadn’t even noticed them. He was too busy being in awe of this house and all the impressions.

“Shush now. C’mon,” Bucky said, grinning as he slung an arm around his shoulders. “This here’s the smartest guy in the room, whether you believe it or not. Just don’t ask him to dance.”

The girls laughed, but kindly. Peggy even gave him a warm smile. “I can confirm that,” she said.

Steve’s face went redder, and Bucky laughed again, patting his back.

The music buzzed. A trumpet solo, then laughter, then someone shouting for another song. The night was young, the lights soft, and outside, the stars were barely visible above the glowing mansion windows.

Bucky turned back to the group, his grin fading just a little as he took it all in. The noise, the drinks, the laughter that didn’t quite reach everyone’s eyes. For a second, something old and tired flickered in him. Then he looked back at Steve, smiled again, and said, “C’mon. Let’s see if Stark’s got any real food around here.”

And Steve followed. Still awkward, still quiet, but content to be where Bucky was.

—

The music thumped faintly from the ballroom as Bucky and Steve made their way through the hallway lined with framed portraits and shining brass sconces. The air smelled of cigars and punch. Sweet, fizzy, a little too much perfume mixed in.

“C’mon,” Bucky murmured over the hum of conversation from the next room. “I saw a buffet table in the sunroom earlier. Stark’s ma must’ve gone overboard.”

Steve trailed close behind, clutching his empty glass. His tie was crooked, his hair slightly mussed, and the last thing he wanted was to make conversation with more strangers. He just wanted to stick near Bucky, who looked maddeningly at ease, even in a house that looked like it cost more than their two streets combined.

Before they made it to the archway that led to the sunroom, a voice cut through the chatter.

“Bucky Barnes.”

He froze.

Steve did too, almost bumping into him.

Bucky turned, and there she was again. Miriam Hale, in a cream-colored dress that shimmered faintly when she moved. Her blonde curls had been styled just right, not a hair out of place, and there was that expression on her face. The tight smile, narrowed eyes, like she’d been waiting for this moment all night.

“Miriam,” Bucky said slowly, his grin faltering. “We are looking for food. So...”

She crossed her arms. “You kinda ignored me earlier. That’s all you’ve got for me?”

Steve’s eyes darted between them, already sensing the storm brewing. *Oh no.*

“I mean- so many people and uh…” Bucky scratched the back of his neck, flashing a small, uncertain smile. “Well, you look great. It’s been a while.”

“Yeah,” she said sharply. “Since you decided to vanish.”

“Miri, I didn’t vanish-”

“Oh, please.” Her tone went flat, unimpressed. “You stopped showing up to lunch with me, stopped walking me home, and then next thing I know, you’re sitting with Peggy and Dot and your little fan club like I never existed. Oh, and you fucked my best friend Evie. Former best friend.”

Damn. Bucky can be a jerk if he wants to.

Steve winced, trying not to look like he was there at all.

Bucky shifted awkwardly. “It wasn’t like that, alright? Things were… complicated.”

“Complicated?” Miriam echoed, one eyebrow arched. “You mean you got bored. A month, Bucky. That’s all I was good for, huh?”

Steve’s stomach twisted. He looked at the floor, wishing he could melt into it.

Bucky’s jaw tightened. “That’s not fair.”

“Oh, it’s not?” She gave a sharp, humorless laugh. “I spent weeks wondering what I did wrong. Maybe I wasn’t sweet enough, maybe I didn’t laugh at your jokes enough, maybe you didn’t like the way I kissed-”

“Miri,” Bucky said quickly, his voice low, glancing around to see who was listening. “Not here, okay?”

“Why not?” she snapped. “You had no problem ignoring me in public, might as well keep the tradition alive.”

The bite in her words made Steve wince. He wanted to step in, to say something. Anything. But Bucky’s expression stopped him. It was that same look Steve had seen countless times before. Cool on the surface, but tight around the edges, the kind that said don’t interfere.

Bucky sighed, exhaling through his nose. “Look, you didn’t do anything wrong, alright? You’re… great. Really. I just-”

“Just what?” she pressed. “Is Evie Novak better in bed?”

He hesitated, words caught somewhere between honesty and politeness. “I just wasn’t what you needed.”

Miriam laughed again, short and bitter. “That’s rich. You dump me, and somehow it’s for my benefit?”

Bucky ran a hand through his hair. “That’s not what I-”

Steve hadn’t known their breakup was this messy. It was what, 2 months ago, that they had been dating? And yes, Bucky had been with Steve in a very twisted way the whole time he was officially Miriam’s boyfriend. Looking at her now, Steve felt really bad for her.

After Bucky ended things with her, he simply avoided her. He was never good at addressing feelings, and disappearing had always been

easier than talking. After that, he started sleeping around with multiple girls, dodging Miriam whenever he saw her, until she eventually stopped trying to get him to explain himself.

By the time Bucky hooked up with Evie Novak, it was over for good anyway.

It wasn't fair. It was, honestly, an asshole move on Bucky's part, but Evie hadn't been innocent either. She knew enough about the messy breakup as Miriam's best friend and chose to ignore it anyway.

Still, knowing what sat underneath it all, the insecurity, the confusion, the quiet despair that drove Bucky to act like a jerk, changed how Steve saw it. It didn't justify the pain Bucky had caused, but it did explain it. And more than that, Steve could see how much Bucky had changed in just the past few weeks. Not fixed. Not perfect. But trying.

"Forget it," she interrupted, shaking her head, her earrings glinting under the chandelier light. "You never could say what you meant, could you?"

There was a long, painful pause. Even the background chatter seemed to fade for a second.

Bucky shifted, glancing to Steve, who looked back helplessly.

"Well," Bucky said finally, forcing a small, strained smile. "Guess I deserved that."

"Yeah," Miriam said, though her voice cracked just slightly. "You did."

And with that, she turned on her heel, her heels clicking against the marble as she walked off toward the music, her figure vanishing into the crowd.

Bucky stood there for a second, rubbing his jaw. "That went about as bad as it could've."

Steve blinked. "What- uh- what was that?"

Bucky sighed, half a chuckle, half an exhausted breath. "That, my friend, was why you don't date girls who like you more than you like yourself."

Steve frowned. "That doesn't even make sense."

"Sure it does," Bucky said, slapping his arm lightly, trying to lighten

the mood. “Now c’mon. Food. Before someone else eats all the deviled eggs.”

As they walked off toward the sunroom, Steve glanced sideways at him.

Bucky looked calm again. Too calm, maybe. Like he’d slipped right back into his easy smile, even if something behind his eyes looked tired.

Steve didn’t say anything. He just followed him, the awkwardness of what he’d just witnessed sitting heavy in his chest.

The party noise picked up again around them. Music, laughter, the smell of smoke and spiked punch, and for a moment, Steve wondered what exactly it was about Bucky Barnes that made him so good at pretending everything was fine when it clearly wasn’t.

They made their way to the sunroom, weaving through clusters of classmates shouting over the swing music that poured from a sleek gramophone in the corner. The air smelled like sugar, tobacco, and too much cologne. Tables lined the walls, stacked with platters of sandwiches, bowls of olives, glass cups, and bottles of punch that looked far too fancy to be just juice.

“See?” Bucky said, sweeping an arm dramatically. “Food. Salvation.”

Steve eyed the buffet, suspiciously poking at something on toothpicks. “You sure that’s edible?”

“It’s Stark’s party,” Bucky said, reaching for a glass of deep red juice. “If it’s not edible, it’s probably expensive.”

He handed one to Steve, who took it gingerly, sniffed it, then shrugged. “Smells sweet.”

“That’s the idea,” Bucky said, grabbing one for himself and a small plate of sandwiches. “Cheers, punk.”

“Yeah, cheers,” Steve muttered automatically, taking a big sip. He blinked. “Huh. That’s… weird.”

Bucky took a sip of his and frowned thoughtfully. “Weird?”

“Yeah,” Steve said, making a face. “Like juice that got left out too long.”

Bucky laughed. “Juice that got left out too long? What kinda poetry is that?”

“I’m serious,” Steve insisted, sipping again just to make sure. “It’s tangy. Like grapes, but angry.”

“Angry grapes?” Bucky choked, nearly spilling his drink as he laughed. “You mean wine, genius?”

Steve blinked, glass halfway to his mouth. “Wine?”

“Probably,” Bucky said, shrugging. “But it’s just punch, right? Maybe Stark’s cook poured in a little something to make it interesting.”

Steve frowned. “Alcohol?”

Bucky tilted his head. “Maybe just a splash.”

He wasn’t supposed to drink. The medication made that very clear. Sarah had made that very clear too, in the quiet, careful way she did when she was worried but didn’t want to scare him. But this was a huge party. Loud, crowded, impossible to disappear in. And he’d just watched his best friend get called out by his ex while knowing, sickeningly, that part of it traced back to him as well. Steve wasn’t a saint either.

So when the glass tilted, and there was that small splash, it didn’t seem dangerous. It seemed harmless. Almost polite.

Just a little, right? Barely anything. That couldn’t hurt. Could it?

Steve hesitated, then shrugged. “It’s not bad, I guess.”

“Atta boy,” Bucky grinned, taking another sip and reaching for a handful of peanuts.

They made their way back toward the big living room, where Joey and Mickey were already deep into a game of poker with Charlie playing dealer. Peggy and Dot were dancing in the background, laughing at something Richie said, who twirled them. The mood and the energy in the room were bright, dizzy, alive.

Steve plopped down on the couch beside Bucky, drink in hand.

“Y’know,” Steve said after a minute, “this juice still tastes funny.”

Bucky chuckled. “Then stop drinkin’ it, idiot.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Steve said firmly. Then, after a pause. “I’m just thirsty.”

He took another gulp.

Five minutes later, the glass was empty. He even drank Richie’s, which he handed to them before going in for another round of dancing with four girls.

“Hey Buck,” he said, squinting at him, “how come you’ve got two faces?”

Maybe it was more than just a splash.

Bucky choked on his sandwich. “What?”

“I swear-” Steve leaned closer, whispering conspiratorially, “-you got two faces. Like- like when the paper doesn’t print right, and it’s blurry. That’s you.”

“Oh, no,” Bucky said, laughing, watching realization dawn. “Oh, Rogers. Oh, no.”

Steve giggled. “No, what?”

“You’re sauced.”

“I’m what?”

“Drunk, buddy.”

Steve looked genuinely offended. “I am not drunk. I’m- hydrated.”

Bucky nearly fell off the couch laughing. “Hydrated with Stark’s mystery punch.”

“I don’t drink,” Steve mumbled, trying to sit straighter. “It’s bad for the heart.”

His mom will be so mad.

“Too late now, pal.”

Steve blinked at him, then grinned. “You’ve got nice hair.”

That stopped Bucky mid-laugh. “What?”

Steve nodded earnestly. “Real nice. It’s shiny. Like… like when the sun hits a dog’s fur just right.”

Bucky wheezed. “A dog’s-? What the hell, Steve?”

“I mean that as a compliment,” Steve said with complete sincerity, slurring a little.

“Sure you do.”

Steve looked around, his eyes slightly unfocused. “This place is loud. Why’s it so loud?”

“It’s a party, genius.”

“Oh.” He leaned back, letting his head flop onto the back of the couch. “It’s… warm in here.”

“Yeah, that’d be the booze,” Bucky teased.

Steve grinned lazily. “I feel… floaty.”

“Floaty, huh?”

“Yeah.” He turned to Bucky again, squinting as if seeing him for the first time. “You’re a good friend, Buck.”

Bucky smiled despite himself. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Steve said softly. “Even if you drag me to rich people’s houses and get me drunk by accident.”

“Hey,” Bucky said, holding up his hands. “You got yourself drunk. I didn’t tell you to chug it like it was milk.”

Steve’s head lolled against the couch, grinning up at the chandelier. “Bucky Barnes,” he murmured, “you’re my best pal.”

“Yeah, I know,” Bucky said gently, still amused but a little touched.

“And,” Steve said solemnly, “if I die from this juice, I want you to tell my ma that I died bravely.”

Bucky barked out another laugh. “You’re not gonna die, you lightweight.”

Steve blinked slowly, then pointed at him. “You’re a lightweight.”

“Sure, pal. Whatever you say.”

By the time Mickey came over and asked what was so funny, Steve had slid halfway down the couch, hiccupping through a story about how he once got his head stuck between the banisters when he was five.

Bucky could barely answer through his laughter.

He figured he’d let Steve ride out the buzz before switching him to water. But for now, he leaned back, shaking his head with a grin.

“Guess even Captain Serious can loosen up sometimes,” he muttered under his breath, watching his best friend laugh at absolutely nothing. Rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, and happier than Bucky had seen him in weeks.

They hadn’t even made it halfway back to the main room before Steve, now flushed and bright-eyed, suddenly grabbed Bucky’s hand.

“Buck,” he said very seriously, his words just barely holding together, “your hand’s warm.”

Bucky blinked. “Yeah, it’s attached to a living person.”

Steve laughed, really laughed, that kind of helpless, delighted giggle that made him lean over slightly. “You’re so funny,” he managed between laughs. “You should tell more jokes.”

“Steve,” Bucky sighed, trying not to grin, “you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“I’m embarrassing you!” Steve pointed out proudly, as if that was somehow an accomplishment.

Before Bucky could even respond, Steve tugged his hand, pulling him along with surprising determination. They wandered through a long hallway that echoed faintly with the distant hum of jazz and laughter from the main hall. Every now and then, they passed a couple leaning against a wall, whispering or kissing, or a group of students lost on their way to the restroom.

“Stevie, where are you even taking me?” Bucky asked, half laughing as he let himself be led.

“You’ll see,” Steve said, voice wobbly. “It’s a secret.”

“Oh great,” Bucky muttered under his breath. “A secret adventure with a drunk guy.”

Steve stopped in front of a door, turned the knob like he’d just discovered buried treasure, and stumbled inside.

The room smelled faintly of cigars and polished wood. An office. One of those posh kinds that looked like no one ever really worked in it. The walls were lined with tall bookcases, a big white oak desk stood near the window, and in the center was a huge leather armchair and a fur rug sprawled on the floor.

Steve blinked down at it, then frowned. “That’s… that’s fur. Like from a dog.”

Bucky laughed. “Probably a bear, genius.”

Steve knelt down, poking at it suspiciously. “Poor dog,” he mumbled, then promptly lost his balance and plopped right down on it, legs crossed, hair slightly mussed.

Bucky leaned against the desk, arms crossed, watching him with an amused smile. “You done mourning the rug?”

Steve looked up at him with wide, solemn eyes. “It was a good dog.”

“Right.” Bucky chuckled, stepping closer and offering him a hand. “C’mon, up you get.”

Steve took his hand but didn’t actually stand. Instead, he tugged, and Bucky almost fell over.

“Steve-!”

The smaller boy laughed, tugging harder until Bucky had to crouch to keep from falling completely. Their faces ended up only inches apart, and Steve’s grin softened into something cute and tender.

“You’ve got really nice eyes,” Steve said suddenly.

Bucky froze. “What?”

“They’re blue,” Steve continued earnestly. “Like- not the ocean kind. More like the sky. The sky when it's sunny and clear.”

Bucky blinked. “You’re out of your mind.”

“I’m serious!” Steve said, tapping a finger against Bucky’s chest for emphasis. “And your hair’s perfect too. Not fair. You wake up and look like you came outta a magazine.”

Bucky snorted. “You’re out of your mind. And drunk.”

Steve ignored that entirely. “And your jawline’s all sharp and perfect, like- like it could cut glass.”

“Alright, that’s enough.”

“And your lips-”

“Steve.”

“-are real nice,” Steve finished stubbornly, grinning at the way Bucky’s ears turned red.

“Okay,” Bucky muttered, standing up and brushing off his pants, “that’s enough flattery for one night.”

Steve made grabby hands toward him. “Bucky, come back. I’m not finished!”

Bucky couldn’t help it. He laughed again, shaking his head. “What are we even doing in here? The fun’s back there, not in some office.”

Steve crossed his arms dramatically, swaying slightly. “The fun is wherever I say it is.”

“Sure it is, pal,” Bucky said, helping him up and steering him toward the armchair.

Steve flopped into it immediately, head tilted back, a lazy smile on his face. “You know what would make it more fun?”

“What, Captain Juicebox?”

“A kiss.”

Bucky blinked. “A- what now?”

Steve grinned, eyes half-lidded and warm. “Just one. For good luck. You always give me good luck.”

“Steve,” Bucky said softly, crouching beside the chair. “We can’t. Not here, not now.”

“Why not?” Steve pouted. “Nobody’s here. Everyone’s busy dancing or smooching or…” He waved vaguely at the door. “…doing weird stuff in hallways.”

“Because,” Bucky said firmly, though his smile betrayed him, “you’re tipsy outta your mind, and you’re gonna regret this tomorrow.”

Steve huffed. “I never regret kisses.”

“You’re gonna regret this one.”

“Nope,” Steve said, popping the “p” like a stubborn kid. Then he leaned forward and poked Bucky’s chest again. “You’re my favorite person, you know that? Best pal I ever had.”

Bucky’s teasing grin softened. “Yeah, I know.”

“I mean it,” Steve mumbled, slumping back again. “You’re warm. And funny. And you always make things better.”

Bucky brushed a hand through his friend’s hair affectionately. “You’re gonna be so embarrassed when you sober up, Stevie.”

Steve blinked up at him, a sleepy smile spreading. “Nah. You’ll still be my best pal.”

“Yeah, I’ll hold you to that,” Bucky said quietly, watching him with a mix of fondness as Steve yawned mid-sentence and slumped deeper into the chair, still mumbling something about “angry grapes.”

Bucky sighed, shaking his head with a small grin. “Unbelievable.”

Two glasses of mysterious punch were apparently enough to knock a good boy who never drank before into such a state.

Steve lifted his head again, a sound halfway between a snort and a giggle bubbling up from his throat. He tried to cover his mouth, but couldn’t stop it, he just started laughing. Really laughing. His whole body shook with it, his head tipping back against the leather armchair.

Bucky blinked, startled at first, then a grin tugged at his mouth. “What’s so funny, you idiot?”

Steve tried to speak but couldn’t catch his breath. He waved a hand uselessly in front of him, tears of laughter threatening to spill. “I- I don’t even know,” he wheezed between hiccups of laughter. “It’s just-

your face when I said-" He broke into another laugh before he could even finish.

Bucky shook his head, chuckling now, too. "You're a mess, Stevie."

Steve's laughter trailed off into a softer smile. His lips puckered in a little pout, his eyes glassy and warm. "Buck," he mumbled, voice small and childish suddenly. "Can I have a kiss?"

Bucky sighed but smiled anyway, the kind of smile that said 'you're impossible.' "You don't give up, huh?"

Steve shook his head, his bottom lip still stuck out. "Please?"

"Alright, alright," Bucky muttered fondly. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to Steve's forehead, his hair brushing against Steve's skin.

But Steve wasn't done. His arms came up suddenly, circling around Bucky's waist, pulling him close until Bucky half-lost his balance and ended up perched on his lap. Steve held on tight, like he didn't want to let go, his chin resting against Bucky's chest.

"Great, you're touchy now too," Bucky murmured, though his hand was already in Steve's hair, combing through the soft, messy strands.

Steve hummed at the touch, eyes fluttering.

"You shouldn't drink mysterious juices anymore, okay?" Bucky asked softly, still running his fingers through it.

Steve smiled, a little lazy, a little shy. "Uh… think so too."

Bucky nodded, smoothing a stray lock behind his ear. "We'll sober you up with plenty of water before gettin' you home. Don't wanna give your ma a heart attack."

"Yeah?" Steve whispered, eyes half open now, his voice soft and fuzzy.

"Yeah," Bucky said, nudging a curl into place. His hands lingered near Steve's temples, then gently cupped his face. They stayed like that for a second, eyes on each other, the sound of the muffled music fading away completely.

Then Bucky leaned in. It wasn't fast or nervous, just easy. Familiar. A kiss that felt like an old habit. Steve's breath hitched quietly before melting into it, his hands tightening at Bucky's waist.

When they broke apart, Steve whispered something that barely carried between them. “You always know what you’re doing.”

Bucky smiled faintly. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Steve shrugged, still whispering. “Just that I… I never was the one doing it. You always… you know…” He trailed off, cheeks pink.

Bucky tilted his head. “Doing what?” he asked gently, already knowing what Steve meant but wanting to make him say it.

Steve ducked his head, laughing nervously. “I dunno. You’re just… confident. You know how to make things feel right.”

Bucky’s grin softened into something almost shy. “I didn’t know you wanted to try being the one in charge more, Stevie. You enjoyed riding my dick, eh?”

Steve looked up, eyes bright, honest. “I don’t know if I’d be any good at it without your lead.”

“Why?”

“Because…” Steve rubbed the back of his neck, thinking. “You always seem to know what to do. I’d probably mess it up.”

Bucky’s thumb brushed his jaw gently, the teasing gone now. “You wouldn’t mess anything up. You never do.”

Steve smiled a little. “Yeah, right.”

“Hey,” Bucky said quietly. “Maybe this isn’t the best time to talk about all that, huh? You’re still a little tipsy.”

Steve chuckled, pressing his forehead against Bucky’s chest. “I’m fine. I just… I like thinking about it. About you. About us.”

Bucky exhaled, the sound half a laugh, half something else. “You’re gonna wake up tomorrow and tell me you didn’t mean half of this.”

Steve looked up again, the room light flickering in his eyes. “No,” he said softly. “I mean it.”

For a long moment, they just stayed like that. Tangled up in a chair too small for both of them, the world quiet around them. The sound of laughter from down the hall, a record skipping somewhere far away.

And Bucky, brushing his thumb over the edge of Steve's cheekbone, murmured, "You're gonna drive me crazy, Rogers."

Steve smiled sleepily. "Promise?"

Bucky laughed quietly, resting his forehead against his. "Yeah, I promise."

A small grin lingered on Steve's lips as he leaned in closer. He shifted forward and gently nudged Bucky back, hands settling at his hips as he moved them up from the armchair with surprising confidence. Their mouths stayed close, brushing, stealing breath from each other as Steve carefully turned them around and guided Bucky down to sit.

Steve's chest heaved as he pulled away, Bucky's tongue licking along his kiss-swollen lips.

"Well?" Bucky grinned. "Is that the end of the show?"

Steve's smile turned playful, eyes bright with something warm and sure. "Not even close," he said quietly. "The best part's still coming."

With that, Steve's hand found Bucky's dick. The already slightly hardened penis pressed against the fabric of Bucky's slacks. Steve teased it, finger stroking along it, Bucky let out a soft breath, lips parting as he relaxed into the touch.

His soft fingers wiggled the zipper before pulling it down and loosening the belt, untucking the suspenders. The pants peeled off easily, Bucky's boxers stained with precum as Steve teased the hem of them along his hipbones.

Bucky's head tipped back against the headrest, eyes closed, lips still parted as he breathed evenly. There was something unfair about how handsome he looked like this. So incredibly handsome that Steve had the sudden urge to bite those pink pouty lips and brush a hand through the soft brown locks curling on his forehead. For a moment, he just glanced at Bucky, taking him in before he leaned his face in, planting a soft kiss on Bucky's length.

Steve's warm breath hit the skin, making it prickle, and Bucky's breath hitching softly. His eyes opened, meeting Steve's gaze again. The blue of his eyes was darker now, the pupils blown wide enough to almost swallow the color. Steve had once heard that love could do that. Make someone's eyes change without them realizing. He didn't know if it was true, or if it even applied here, but the thought settled warmly in

his chest anyway.

It made him smile, small and private, like the moment was just for him.

A soft giggle slipped from Bucky's lips, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed it back. He reached up and cupped Steve's face, warm hands settling gently against his cheeks, thumbs brushing lightly as if he were holding something fragile and precious.

"Not here, Stevie," Bucky whispered, leaning down to plant a kiss on his forehead.

"Just let me try," Steve retorted, eyes shining with mischief and affection. "Please."

Bucky let out a quiet sigh, his hands drifting lower, one finger tracing along the soft line of Steve's jaw with an almost absent-minded tenderness.

Taking that as a yes, Steve leaned in, lips closing around the tip. His tongue traced the length as he tipped his head forward and let the dick slide in deeper. Once the tip almost met the back of his throat, he started to suck slowly. He had done this before, but still felt a bit unsure about his movements. The whole time, he would glance up, making sure to check for any discomfort on Bucky's face. Luckily, he saw nothing there but pleasure and the boyish smile.

A few moments in, they forgot everything else.

They forgot the thin walls, the unfamiliar space, the fact that this wasn't Steve's apartment. It wasn't Bucky's room either, with its blue walls and the illusion of safety he clung to there whenever the door was locked. This wasn't safe territory at all. But closeness had a way of lying to you. It blurred edges. It convinced you that nothing bad could reach you when you were this close to someone who felt like home.

So they didn't think. Not about consequences. Not about timing. Not about how fragile everything already was.

If someone had told them how much would happen in the next 32 days, they would have laughed it off, or shaken their heads, or kissed anyway just to prove the world wrong. In their worst nightmares, they couldn't have imagined how quickly things could crack.

And then it happened. *It fucking happened.*

The doorknob rattled once.

Before either of them could even look up, the door swung wide open.

Light spilled in from the bright hallway along with laughter, perfume, and the muffled beat of music from the party downstairs. There in the doorway stood Howard Stark, his tie loose, a champagne glass in one hand, and a girl draped around his neck like a silk scarf. Both were laughing, breathless and tipsy, halfway through a joke when they froze.

Bucky and Steve froze, too.

For one agonizing heartbeat, the room seemed to stop breathing. Bucky was still pantless in the armchair, Steve halfway between his legs and pulling back, both of them caught like photographs in the flicker of the hallway light.

Then Howard blinked, his drunk smile widening. “Oh,” he said, in a voice that carried an amused disbelief. His brows shot up, his grin spreading. “Well, don’t let me interrupt your date, boys.”

The girl beside him snorted, too drunk to understand what she was seeing. Howard gave a little chuckle, a short, slurred bark of laughter, and then, with the kind of amusement that could only come from wealth and carelessness, he tugged the door shut again.

The door clicked.

Silence.

For a long, trembling second, all Bucky could hear was his own heartbeat. It pounded in his ears, drowning out the muffled jazz from below. Then he moved. Too fast, too sudden, almost falling over Steve’s body as he hurried up from the armchair. He moved in an odd way, as if the air had turned poisonous. His hips hit the edge of the desk, and a stack of papers slid off to the carpet.

“Buck-” Steve began.

“God,” Bucky gasped, clutching his head, eyes wild. “Oh god, no, no, no-” He bent to grab his pants, nearly tripping as he yanked them on, his fingers trembling so badly that he fumbled the buttons twice. “He saw- he saw us! Steve, he saw us! He fucking saw us!”

“Bucky,” Steve said quickly, standing, still unsteady but suddenly far more sober. The adrenaline had burned through the haze. He reached out a hand. “Hey, it’s fine, it’s okay-”

“It’s not okay!” Bucky’s voice cracked, too loud for the tiny room. “You don’t get it, Steve, you don’t get it!” His chest was heaving now, his breath too shallow. “He’s gonna tell- someone’ll find out- my dad-”

“Bucky-”

“My dad!” The word came out broken, strangled. Bucky stumbled backward until his shoulders hit the bookshelves. His eyes were unfocused, darting toward the door as if expecting it to burst open again. “He’ll kill me. He will. If he ever- if anyone ever-”

Steve was in front of him in a second, catching him by the shoulders. “Hey, look at me,” he said, his voice soft but firm. “Howard’s drunk outta his mind. He probably won’t even remember this tomorrow.”

“He’ll remember.” Bucky’s voice was a whisper now, raw and shaking. “You saw his face- he’ll remember. He’ll tell people, and then-” He stopped, his throat tightening as he forced air into his lungs. He looked like he might be sick. “They’ll all know, Steve. They’ll all know what we are.”

Steve’s heart twisted. “Bucky.”

“God, what were we thinking?” Bucky pressed his palms over his eyes, fingers digging into his temples. “I didn’t- I didn’t even lock the door- how could I not-” He broke off, dragging in a ragged breath that hitched halfway through. “I was careful, always, every time, I made sure-” His knees wobbled, and Steve caught him before he could fall.

“Breathe,” Steve whispered, holding him tight. “Hey, Buck, breathe, okay? You’re fine. We’re fine.”

But Bucky was shaking, every muscle wound tight, the panic too deep to hear logic. “You don’t understand,” he choked. “If anyone finds out, I’m finished. He’ll throw me out, Steve. He’ll- he’ll ruin me. My dad- he’ll ruin everything.”

Steve swallowed hard, his arms firm around him. “He won’t. He won’t hear about it. I promise.”

Bucky didn’t seem to hear him. His breathing came fast and shallow, eyes still wide with fear. “We’re in Stark’s house, Steve,” he muttered.

“His house. Everyone’s here- what if he tells someone downstairs? What if someone already-”

“He won’t,” Steve said again, his voice steady even though his own pulse was racing. “Howard’s too drunk to tie his own shoes. He’s not gonna remember a damn thing.”

Bucky’s voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “You don’t know him like I do.”

Steve hesitated. “What do you mean?”

“I used to be friends with him,” Bucky said numbly, eyes still on the floor. “He knows me, knows my dad. His old man and mine- they work together sometimes. He could- he could-” His voice cracked again, and he pressed a shaking hand over his mouth. “Steve, he can’t tell my father. You don’t know what he’d do to me.”

Steve felt a chill that had nothing to do with the night air. “Hey,” he said, softly now, gently pulling Bucky’s hand away from his mouth. “Hey, look at me.”

Bucky’s eyes finally met his, and Steve saw the tears welling at the edges. Not the angry, stubborn tears Bucky usually fought. These were smaller, quieter, terrified.

“Nobody’s gonna hurt you,” Steve said, the words low but fierce. “Not while I’m here, okay? You’re safe.”

But Bucky shook his head. “You can’t stop him.”

“Maybe not,” Steve admitted. “But I can stand beside you. That’s what I’ll do.”

For a long while, neither of them moved. The only sound was the faint record spinning somewhere down the hall, a trumpet wailing softly through the wood.

Eventually, Bucky sank down onto the rug by the desk, elbows on his knees, face hidden in his hands. His breathing steadied a little, though his shoulders still trembled. “I’m such an idiot,” he muttered. “I should’ve known better.”

Steve knelt beside him. “We didn’t do anything wrong.”

Bucky gave a hollow laugh. “In this world, Steve? You sure about

that?”

Steve opened his mouth, then closed it again. There wasn’t an answer that would fix it. Not in 1940, not here, not now.

Chapter 30: Chapter 30

Sunday, May 20th, 1940 - 32 days left

Bucky stood in front of the hallway mirror, straightening his collar for what felt like the tenth time. His mother had insisted on the little navy tie and freshly pressed white shirt, and then, at his hesitant request, she had slicked his thick hair back with enough pomade to survive a hurricane. It looked too neat, too unlike him, but that was the point. Today, he wanted to look proper. Or maybe he wanted to feel like someone God might actually listen to.

His reflection stared back, pale but tidy, a faint tremor in his hands when he smoothed the front of his light-gray slacks. The polished shoes, the stiff collar, the crisp cuffs, they all made him look like the picture of a well-brought-up young man. Inside, though, his stomach was tight.

“Ready?” Valeria called softly from downstairs.

“Yeah, Ma,” Bucky answered, voice catching slightly.

The ride to church was short, the neighborhood still shaking off sleep. The bells began as they turned the corner, and Bucky’s chest gave a small flutter at the sound. He didn’t even know why he was so nervous. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t been in this building every Sunday since he could walk. But today felt different. Today he needed something. Forgiveness, luck, maybe silence.

The building loomed ahead, stone dark, the steps wide and clean. Inside, the air smelled of beeswax and old wood. Valeria’s hand guided him gently toward the pews where a cluster of the neighborhood women were already gathered, chatting brightly.

“James! Look at you, sweetheart!” shouted Mrs. Smith, clasping his hand between hers. “Handsome as ever.”

Bucky smiled, that polite, practiced grin he’d worn at church since he was ten. “Mornin’, Mrs. Smith. How’s Mr. Smith doing?”

“Oh, better now that summer’s comin’. Hal’s not the type of man to let cancer win, dear. He appreciates all the praying we do in this community for him.”

“I’m glad to hear that he is better,” Bucky said softly, glancing at his mother, who smiled back with quiet pride.

Another woman, Mrs. Hensley, reached out to fix his tie, laughing. “You’re just as polite as ever, James. No wonder all the girls at church like you.”

Bucky’s ears went hot. He rubbed the back of his neck, murmuring a thank-you, and managed another faint smile. The chatter swirled around him. Snippets of gossip, laughter.

But underneath it all, Bucky’s thoughts were elsewhere. Howard’s smirk from the other night kept flashing in his mind. The sound of the door creaking open, that split-second of being seen. It still made his chest tighten. He couldn’t shake the thought that Howard might’ve told someone already. Maybe as a joke, maybe worse.

So he was here to pray. Not for miracles, exactly. Just for quiet. For things to stay hidden. For the world to stay small and safe for a little while longer.

He excused himself gently from the women’s circle, murmuring something about finding a seat before the service. But then the main doors opened again, a rush of warm air entering with a few more families.

Dot came in with her parents, her white gloves folded neatly, a soft blue ribbon in her hair. Her uncle, Father Miller, was already near the altar, greeting parishioners.

For a moment Bucky just watched her, that restless flutter in his stomach returning. She was part of the same little world he’d grown up in. The world of kind smiles and Sunday manners and he suddenly wasn’t sure if he belonged in it anymore.

Still, politeness was reflex. He smoothed his shirt, slipped a hand through his slicked hair, and started toward her, his shoes clicking softly on the stone floor.

He had no idea what he’d say, only that keeping still would drive him crazy.

Bucky reached Dot just as her parents were greeting the people near the front pew. She turned at the gentle tug on her gloved hand, surprise flickering across her face when she saw him.

“Bucky?” she said softly, her brown eyes bright under the light from the tall windows.

“Hey,” he murmured, his voice lower than usual, almost hoarse. He hesitated, then added, “Can you- uh, come with me? Just for a minute.”

Dot blinked but nodded. She’d known Bucky long enough to recognize when he wasn’t himself. He still had that easy charm most days, the grin that could get him out of anything, but today, his mouth was set in a thin, worried line.

He guided her carefully through the half-filled church, past the pews where old Mrs. Romano was whispering her rosary, to one of the side altars near a tall statue of Christ carrying the cross. The candles below it burned low, tiny pools of wax glimmering.

Dot’s gaze traveled up and down the statue, then back to him. “You look… different today,” she said with a small smile. “Your hair’s so- uh, tidy. Your mother must’ve been thrilled.”

Bucky huffed softly, brushing his hand through the stiff pomade-slicked hair. “Yeah, she nearly cried from joy when I let her slick it back.” Then, quieter: “But this ain’t about my hair.”

He stepped closer to the little altar, staring at the statue’s solemn face. The carved eyes seemed to look right through him, and for some reason that made it worse. He swallowed hard.

“Dot,” he began, his fingers tightening on the edge of the wooden stand, “I gotta pray.”

Her brows rose gently. “Alright… then pray. That’s what we’re here for, isn’t it?”

He shook his head, jaw flexing. “No, I mean- really pray. The kind that counts. The kind that gets heard.”

Dot tilted her head, studying him. “Bucky… what’s going on?”

He stared at the candle flames, their light wavering like his thoughts. His voice came out rough, unsteady. “I wanna talk to God, but I’m afraid ’cause we ain’t spoken in so long.”

For a moment, neither of them moved. The murmur of people settling into pews echoed softly through the church, a hymn faintly starting

from the choir loft. Dot finally reached out, her gloved fingers brushing his arm.

“Then let’s talk to Him,” she said gently. “Together. He listens, even when you think He doesn’t.”

She knelt first on the little cushion, folding her hands. Bucky followed, stiffly, his knees creaking against the wood. He stared at his hands for a second, as if unsure what to do with them, before finally pressing them together.

Dot began softly, her voice a whisper at first, then steadier. “Dear Lord, we thank You for this morning, for bringing us here, for hearing us even when our hearts are loud with worry…”

Bucky closed his eyes. He tried to follow her words, to shape something of his own, but his mind wouldn’t stop racing. Howard’s laughter echoed somewhere deep inside his skull. His father’s voice overlapped it, sharp and unforgiving. Every time he tried to form a thought, it fell apart before it reached heaven.

Dot’s hand brushed his shoulder, grounding him. “Go on,” she whispered. “Tell Him what’s in your heart.”

He tried. He really did. But when he opened his mouth, the words came out broken. “God, I… I don’t know if You still listen. I’ve messed up, maybe worse than I know. I don’t even know where to start, or if You’d care to hear it.”

His voice cracked at the end, quiet enough that only Dot could hear.

Dot’s expression softened. She didn’t ask for details, maybe she knew better. Instead, she picked up where his words faltered, praying on his behalf, her tone full of calm strength. “And Lord, if this young man’s lost his way a little, please remind him that You never stop waiting for him. That You see his good heart even when he doesn’t.”

Bucky’s shoulders trembled slightly. His eyes stayed fixed on the candles, but they blurred until all he saw was gold light swimming in tears he refused to let fall.

When Dot finished, silence settled between them. Peaceful on her side, heavy on his.

She turned to him softly. “Hey,” she murmured. “Are you alright?”

He blinked, his throat tight. “Yeah. Yeah, I just…” He rubbed his palms together, voice low and strained. “I don’t think it worked.”

Dot frowned faintly. “That’s not how prayer works, Bucky. You don’t get an answer right away. You just… trust.”

“Yeah,” he muttered, trying for a smile that didn’t quite land. “Trust.”

Dot didn’t press. She simply reached for a matchstick and lit another small candle on the rack beside them, watching the flame flare to life. “Then we’ll let this one burn for whatever’s bothering you. God already knows.”

—

The afternoon light slanted through the curtains of Bucky’s room, drowsy gold spilling over his desk. His history notes were spread everywhere. Half-scribbled timelines and loose pages smudged with pencil. He’d been staring at the same paragraph for ten minutes, trying to memorize dates and names. Every few seconds, his thoughts circled back to the same thing. The party, the door opening, Howard Stark’s stupid grin.

He chewed at the back of his pencil, tapped it against the desk, and sighed through his nose. Somewhere below, the sound of his mother clattering pans drifted up from the kitchen. The radio hummed faintly through the floorboards. Some Sunday program half-lost between Romanian lullabies, she sang sometimes when she was alone.

Then the telephone rang.

That sharp, bell-metal ring that always echoed down the whole house. Bucky pushed up on his bed, rubbing a hand through his neatly slicked hair. The pomade had loosened a little through the day, but it still held. With a sigh, he padded out into the hall.

He leaned against the wall, one hand braced beside the rotary dial, and lifted the receiver.

“Barnes residence.”

There was a pause, then a familiar breathy voice. “Hey, Buck. It’s me.”

He exhaled slowly, a little tension easing right away. “Stevie. You just saved me from losing my mind over history.”

Steve chuckled on the other end, that soft, tired laugh that always made Bucky smile even on bad days. “Lucky you. I’ve been drowning in it since breakfast.”

“Guess we’ll both fail gracefully, huh?” Bucky said, half-smiling.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Steve teased lightly, then his tone softened. “We’ve got ten minutes before the bill runs up, so talk to me. You sound… off.”

Bucky hesitated, glancing down the hallway. His mother’s footsteps drifted faintly from below, her humming carrying up the stairs. He lowered his voice. “I dunno. Just got this bad feeling.”

“About the test?”

“About everything.” He sighed, rubbing his thumb along the smooth edge of the phone cord. “About what happened at the party. About Howard.”

Steve’s voice gentled right away. “Buck, you’re wound too tight. You’re thinkin’ worst case again.”

“Maybe,” Bucky muttered, chewing his lip. “But, I mean… what if he says somethin’? He’s loud when he drinks, you know that. What if he blabs to someone?”

“Why would he?” Steve asked softly. “What’s he get outta that?”

Bucky didn’t answer at first. He stared down at the carpet runner under his feet, the little flowers on it faded from years of footsteps. “Because he’s Howard Stark,” he finally said. “And guys like him don’t keep things quiet. They brag. They use people.”

Steve stayed silent for a few seconds, thinking, then said gently, “He was drunk outta his mind, Buck. I doubt he even remembers openin’ that door. He probably forgot by the time he found the next bottle.”

“Yeah,” Bucky said, though his voice didn’t sound convinced. He ran a hand down his face, palm rough against his jaw. “You’re probably right.”

“I am right,” Steve insisted. “You’re just spooked. It was a close call, sure, but it’s over. You’re fine. We’re fine.”

For a while, Bucky just listened to Steve breathe on the other end of

the line. He could hear little household sounds in the background. The clink of dishes, a soft murmur of Sarah's voice, he couldn't quite make out. It made the whole world feel smaller, safer.

He finally spoke again, his voice quieter. "You're always right, y'know that?"

Steve snorted. "Hardly ever."

"Well, this time maybe you are," Bucky admitted, the corners of his mouth twitching. "Still feels like someone's watchin'. I can't shake it."

"That's just nerves," Steve said. "Sleep, food, and my company. Those are the cures."

Bucky laughed under his breath. "Company, huh?"

"Yeah. You up for it? I'll come by once the kitchen's clean."

"You don't have to," Bucky said automatically, though there was a flicker of hope in his voice.

"I want to."

Bucky leaned further against the wall, the receiver pressed to his ear. "Alright, fine. But don't rush. Sarah probably can use your help, I mean, she works a lot and is probably tired."

Steve smiled on the other end. Bucky could hear it in his voice. "You sound like her when she's trying to make me feel guilty over forgetting chores."

"Maybe she's rubbin' off on me."

"That wouldn't be a bad thing."

Bucky's laugh came easier this time, warm and quiet. "Guess not. Alright, I'll be here. Gonna pretend to study so my mom thinks I'm doin' somethin' productive."

"Tell her I said hi," Steve said softly. "And Buck?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't let your head eat you alive before I get there, alright? You're fine. You're safe. He's not gonna say anything."

Bucky swallowed, his throat tight. “Yeah,” he said again. “Okay.”

“Good.”

There was a pause when neither was quite ready to hang up. Then Steve sighed. “Ten minutes are up soon. I’ll see you.”

“See you soon, Stevie.”

The line clicked, and the house went quiet again.

Bucky stayed leaning against the wall for a while, staring at the phone in his hand. Downstairs, he could hear his mother humming again, the smell of lunch drifting faintly through the air. For the first time since Friday night, he exhaled all the way, shoulders sagging a little.

Maybe Steve was right. Maybe it would all be okay.

—

The doorbell rang just as the church bells in the distance finished chiming four. Bucky practically leapt up from his desk. His pencil rolled off onto the floor, forgotten. He jogged down the hallway, his socks slipping a little on the polished wood as he reached the staircase, then half-skipped down the steps two at a time.

He could already see Steve through the frosted glass of the front door. He was standing there neatly as always, a little awkward in his pressed brown trousers, suspenders, and short-sleeved shirt. He had one hand tucked in his pocket, the other pushing back a strand of hair the wind had mussed on the way over. The afternoon sun hit his face, catching the glow on his nose.

Bucky swung open the door, a grin breaking loose before he could stop it. “Stevie!”

Steve barely had time to answer before Bucky pulled him into a hug. It was quick, tight, and unexpectedly earnest. Bucky buried his nose against Steve’s shoulder just long enough to breathe in the familiar scent of soap, laundry starch.

“Hey there, Buck,” Steve laughed, patting his back. “Miss me that much?”

Bucky huffed, pretending to scoff but smiling. “Just makin’ sure you’re real.”

When they pulled apart, he stepped back to let Steve inside. Steve wiped his shoes carefully on the mat and began unlacing them, always the polite guest, while Bucky hovered beside him.

“Steve, is that you?”

Bucky turned his head. “Yeah, ma! It’s Steve!”

Valeria Barnes appeared in the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a dishcloth, cheeks a little flushed from the oven’s heat. Her hair was loose but neat, curls framing her sharp features. Her eyes lit up as soon as she saw Steve.

“Ah, my boy!” she exclaimed, as though he were her own son returning home from war. “I didn’t know you were coming! Sit, sit. Come in, don’t stand there like a statue!”

Steve blushed but smiled, following Bucky toward the kitchen. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Barnes.”

“Valeria, please,” she corrected as always, gesturing at the table already set with a lace runner and a steaming pie dish that smelled of baked apples, sugar, and cinnamon. “I hope you’re hungry, Steve. I just finished baking. New recipe. Smells delicious, hm?”

“It does, Mrs Barnes,” Steve said politely, sitting where she pointed.

“The new recipe book George bought for me is truly a blessing.” She gave him an approving nod and turned toward her son. “James, plates. Forks. Napkins. You know the drill.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Bucky said automatically, pulling open drawers and cupboards. Steve started to rise, but Valeria clucked her tongue.

“Steve, no. You sit. You’re a guest. My boy can manage his own hands.”

Bucky shot Steve a look, half fond, half exasperated, while he set the table. Steve chuckled and sank back into the chair obediently.

Valeria brought over the dish, setting it down perfectly. “Apple crumble cake. You like that, yes?”

Steve’s eyes widened at the smell. “I sure do.”

“Then eat.” She winked, handing him the first slice, then one to Bucky. “You tell your mother I feed you properly. She works too

hard."

"Ma, Sarah's fine," Bucky said, grabbing a fork.

"Fine, but tired," Valeria replied, settling into the chair across the two boys. "You should take her a piece later, Steve. Sweeten her evening. Good women like her deserve cake."

"I'll do that," Steve promised.

While he talked, Valeria reached over and brushed her fingers through Bucky's hair, trying to fix the piece that had fallen loose from its slicked-back hold. "Ai, James, you ruined it already."

Bucky ducked away with a groan. "Ma, don't-"

"You asked me to do it for you this morning!" she teased, laughing. "What, you suddenly too old for your mama's hand?"

Steve laughed, hiding it behind his fork. "Maybe you can give him lessons, Mrs Barnes. He's got this one curl that never listens."

Bucky's head whipped toward him. "Stevie!"

Valeria grinned. "See? Even your friend agrees. You need help."

"Traitors, both of you," Bucky muttered, though he was smiling as he took another bite of cake.

Valeria's laughter filled the room, soft and full. She joined them with a small slice of her own and slipped back into her seat with the casual elegance of someone used to commanding a kitchen.

Steve sat quietly for a bit, watching the two of them. He'd been in this kitchen countless times before. The tiled floor, the embroidered curtains, the faint scent of lemon polish, but something about it struck him differently now. The way Bucky leaned into his mother's teasing, how his shoulders were loose, not hunched. The way he didn't flinch when she reached across to swat his wrist for putting his elbow on the table.

"James, posture!" she scolded gently. "You eat like a gentleman, not like a sack of potatoes."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, straightening automatically.

Steve hid a smile behind his fork again. There was warmth here, not

fear. Bucky was soft-spoken but not guarded. He even teased back.

“So,” Valeria asked between bites, “what plans for today, boys? Not just eat all my cake, I hope.”

“We gotta study,” Steve said, dusting a crumb off his shirt. “History exam tomorrow.”

“Civil War stuff,” Bucky added.

Valeria wrinkled her nose slightly. “American history… so much fighting. You people make heroes out of soldiers like they grow on trees.”

“Ma,” Bucky said, smirking, “Europe’s not much better. You guys are at war right now.”

That earned him a soft whack on the shoulder with her folded kitchen cloth. “Watch your mouth, James Buchanan! Romania is not ‘you guys.’ And it’s not even involved. Not yet. Hush before I send you to your father to argue politics.”

Bucky laughed outright this time, grinning at Steve. “See what I live with?”

Steve shook his head, smiling widely. “You wouldn’t last a day without her.”

Valeria gave an exaggerated sigh, one hand over her heart. “At least someone appreciates me.”

The three of them laughed, the sound warm and real.

For a while, it was all easy. The smell of cinnamon, the hum of the fridge, the faint street noise through the open window. Steve watched Bucky lean back in his chair, laughing at something his mother said, his cheeks soft in the sunlight. It was nice to see that Bucky at least could feel at ease with his mother sometimes.

—

The stairs creaked the way they always did. One step in the middle whining like an old hinge as the boys made their way up. The smell of cinnamon and apples still lingered faintly on their clothes from Valeria’s kitchen, and the sound of her humming a folk tune floated faintly up after them.

Bucky's room was exactly the way it always was. Tidy in its own messy way. The walls were painted a faded blue, sun-bleached near the window. The familiar old radio sat on the nightstand. The desk, however, looked like a battlefield of notes, half-read books, and pencils.

Bucky went straight to the window first thing, pushing it open with a squeak. The early evening air drifted in, soft and cool. From outside came the distant hum of a car, a barking dog, and the faint voices of kids playing somewhere down the block.

Steve, already comfortable, flopped into the wooden chair by Bucky's desk and began gathering the scattered history notes, aligning the edges like the neat freak he was. "You could at least put little numbers on these, so you know their order," he teased.

Bucky just chuckled under his breath, collecting his neatly pressed church clothes from where he'd dropped them earlier. The white shirt, the tie, the stiff trousers. He folded them carefully, almost absently, before putting them back into the closet.

Steve watched him for a moment, curious. "So… what was with the good boy getup today? You looked like you were about to be knighted by the Pope."

Bucky's cheeks colored a little as he closed the closet door. "Ma helped with my hair. Practically glued it down," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "I told her I wanted to look proper today. And it satisfied my dad enough to not drag me to the barber today."

"Proper?" Steve echoed with a small grin.

Bucky hesitated, then sighed. "Yeah. I went to church this morning. Prayed."

Steve blinked, sitting up straighter. "Really? You? You always act like church is more your ma's thing."

"It is," Bucky said quietly. He moved to sit on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, looking at his hands. "But I wanted to… I don't know. Talk to God again, I guess. See if He's still there."

Steve's grin softened, fading into something gentler. "You think He's listening?"

Bucky shrugged, staring at his palms as though the answer might be

written there. “I don’t know. Ma always says He listens to everyone. But I ain’t sure He ever heard me.” He let out a small laugh that sounded all hollow and nervous. “Figured maybe if I looked like a decent boy, slick hair and all, He might pay more attention this time.”

Steve leaned back in the chair, spinning the pencil in his hand. “You really think God’s the type to care how neat your hair is?”

Bucky smiled faintly. “Ma says it’s about respect. When she first came here, before she met my dad, the church was all she had. Didn’t know much English, didn’t know anyone. But they helped her find work, gave her community. I think… for her, faith was home before she had one.”

There was a long pause. The wind caught the curtain, making it blow gently inward.

Steve’s voice was soft. “That’s kind of beautiful.”

“Yeah.” Bucky exhaled. “For her, maybe. For me… I don’t know.”

Steve set the pencil down, watching his friend. “You don’t believe, do you?”

Bucky hesitated. “I did. When I was little, I really did. Prayed before bed. Read the bible with my ma. But it got harder.”

Steve tilted his head. “Harder how?”

Bucky looked at him, eyes a little distant, a little pained. “If God’s real, He made me the way I am, right?”

Steve frowned, not fully sure where this was going.

Bucky’s voice went quiet. “And if He made me this way… why does it feel like I’m wrong?”

Steve didn’t answer right away. The weight of that sentence hung in the air between them.

Bucky gave a small, uneasy laugh to fill the silence. “I’ve tried praying it away, y’know? Prayed so many times that I’d just, you know, wake up and like girls. That I’d look at someone like Dot or Evie and feel what I’m supposed to. But I never did.” He swallowed hard, eyes dropping to the floor. “And if He’s out there, He sure didn’t help.”

Steve’s chest ached hearing that again. Bucky had mentioned this

before, and the fact that he would do it over and over again just proved how much it bothered him. He really deeply believed that something was wrong with him.

“I went today ‘cause I thought… maybe if I prayed hard enough, He’d at least help keep Howard quiet.”

“Howard Stark?” Steve said softly.

Bucky nodded. “Yeah. ‘Cause if he tells anyone- if he breathes a word of what he saw…” He trailed off, rubbing his forehead. “God, I don’t know, Steve. Maybe I just wanted someone bigger than me to handle it for once. Someone who isn’t… me.”

Steve pushed the chair back and came over, sitting beside him on the bed. The mattress dipped under their weight. “You don’t think you’re wrong, Buck,” he said gently. “You just think you are ‘cause people told you that.”

Bucky gave him a sideways glance, a small, sad smile. “You sound like my ma when she’s tryin’ to make me feel better.”

“Maybe she’s right,” Steve said quietly. “Maybe God doesn’t care who you love, as long as you’re good. Maybe He made you kind ‘cause the world needs more of that.”

Bucky blinked, his throat tightening.

Steve went on, his voice steady and warm. “If there is a God, He’d be proud of you. ‘Cause you look out for people. You take care of your mom, your sister, your friends. You put everyone before yourself.”

Bucky’s lip trembled slightly before he laughed under his breath, trying to shake it off. “You’re too good at this, you know?”

“Good at what?”

“Making me wanna believe you.”

Steve smiled faintly. “Then maybe you should.”

Bucky looked at him for a long moment, at the way the light from the window hit Steve’s face, the faint sheen of warmth in his eyes. For the first time since the party, the tightness in his chest really eased.

He leaned his head on Steve’s shoulder, looking out the window. “Maybe I will. Just this once.”

Steve's grin widened a bit. "That's all right. I'll believe for both of us the rest of the week."

Chapter 31: Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

> Trigger warning for extreme heartbreak this chapter. I'm so sorry in advance. I did warn you :(
>
> Also, well, this book is now halfway published, and I wanna again thank you all for the amazing feedback, comments, and love I received for this fic. This story is like my baby, and watching it grow and be liked is so fucking cutesy. So excited for the second half, honestly, and I am curious to see how you all will like it. I hope the tag "it starts slow but goes downhill even faster" will finally be explained properly with this chapter. Love you all and see you again sometime next week with more updates <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Monday, May 21st, 1940 - 31 days left

"Time's up. Pencils down, everyone. Sheets in the air, please."

Mr. Callahan's voice cut through the low scratching of pencils and the restless shuffling of students at their desks. Chairs squeaked as half the class groaned, half sighed with relief. A rustle of paper filled the room as the students lifted their answer sheets, fanning the air with a mix of pride and fear.

Bucky leaned back in his seat, exhaling through his nose. "Well," he muttered under his breath, "either I did great or I just rewrote the entire Civil War wrong."

Steve laughed, trying to hide it behind his hand as Mr. Callahan came down the row, collecting the stacks of papers. "You're lucky he grades on pity," Steve said quietly.

Bucky smirked, rolling his pencil between his fingers. "Maybe he'll give me extra credit for creativity."

The tension of the test was already turning into the usual after-exam chatter. The buzz of voices rose as the class compared answers, argued over dates, and joked about questions that confused them.

"Hey, Barnes," Mickey called from across the rows of tables, spinning his pencil. "You remembered when the battle of Shiloh ended?"

Bucky raised his eyebrows. “Sure. It was the day before the next battle started.”

That got a laugh from their row, even Mr. Callahan’s mustache twitched as he tried not to smile.

Steve shook his head, still chuckling. “You’re unbelievable.”

Bucky leaned back, folding his arms behind his head. “And yet you still studied with me.”

“I like a challenge,” Steve teased.

Before Bucky could fire back, the classroom door creaked open.

Every head turned.

Standing in the doorway was Principal Hargreeves. Tall, gray-haired, and always buttoned up in a dark, too-tight suit that looked like it had been pressed with military precision. The man never smiled, not even at the Christmas assembly. His presence was enough to hush the entire class in an instant.

The clock ticked audibly in the silence.

“Mr. Callahan,” the principal said in his low, even tone. “May I borrow two of your students?”

Callahan straightened immediately, smoothing his tie. “Of course, sir. Which ones?”

“James Barnes and Steven Rogers.”

Bucky’s heart dropped straight through the floor. He froze, halfway through tucking his pencil into his case. Steve glanced at him, brows furrowed, quiet alarm flickering in his eyes.

The classroom stayed silent as Bucky slowly stood, his chair legs scraping the floor. Steve followed a beat later, his movements careful, uncertain.

“Is there something wrong, sir?” Mr. Callahan asked, but Hargreeves merely gestured to the hallway.

“I’ll discuss it privately.”

That was all.

And then the door clicked shut behind them.

The hallway was too quiet, the kind of quiet that made Bucky's pulse pound in his ears. He slung his satchel over his shoulder with trembling hands, trying to keep them steady. The sound of their footsteps echoed on the linoleum as they followed the principal down the corridor.

"Sir?" Steve began, his voice careful but steady, "may I ask what this is about?"

Hargreeves didn't slow down. "You may not."

Bucky's throat felt dry. His fingers dug into the strap of his bag, knuckles white. He could feel Steve's gaze flick toward him, silent worry radiating off him.

It couldn't be what he thought. *It couldn't.*

But the thought pressed harder with each step. Howard Stark. The party. The door.

The breath caught in his chest.

He wanted to ask if that was it. Just wanted to make sure that it wasn't it. But his tongue felt heavy, his stomach twisting tighter with every step down the polished hallway.

The principal's office door loomed ahead, a dark paneled door with frosted glass that read "PRINCIPAL HARGREEVES" in gold letters.

Hargreeves opened it briskly and gestured inside. "Sit."

They obeyed without a word, lowering themselves into the two wooden chairs in front of the heavy desk. The smell of coffee and paper hung thick in the air. A clock ticked somewhere behind them, steady but not doing anything to calm the nervous boys.

Bucky sat with his hands pressed tightly together, eyes fixed on the desk to avoid meeting the principal's cold stare. His heart was racing so fast he could feel it in his throat.

He didn't need to look at Steve to know his friend was tense, too. His shoulders squared, eyes tracking every movement like he was ready to protect them both from whatever came next.

The principal shut the door behind him with a quiet *click.*

And then the silence stretched, heavy and waiting.

Principal Hargreeves closed the door and took his seat behind the wide oak desk, the faint creak of the leather chair echoing in the small office. The window blinds were half drawn, letting in narrow lines of pale morning light that cut across the dust in the air. He folded his hands neatly in front of him and looked at them both, expression unreadable.

Bucky sat stiffly, trying to breathe through the pounding in his chest. His palms were slick with sweat, his eyes fixed on a tiny chip on the edge of the desk. Steve was beside him, upright, his jaw already set.

“Mr. Barnes,” Hargreeves began, his voice calm, clipped. The kind of authority that made every student respect him. “Mr. Rogers. I received a report this morning.”

He let the words hang there for a moment, as though waiting for one of them to speak. Neither did.

“A student,” he continued, “came to my office before first bell. They reported having witnessed behavior… unbecoming of young men from this institution.” His eyes flicked between them, sharp and analysing. “To be direct, the report described what I can only call homosexual activity between two of our students.”

The silence that followed was absolute.

Bucky’s breath caught mid-chest. His throat closed up. For a moment, everything blurred, the wood paneling, the ticking clock, even the man’s voice. It all melted into a dull noise in his ears.

Steve moved first. “That’s not true,” he said, his voice steady at first, then firmer. “That’s not true, sir.”

Hargreeves didn’t flinch. “I see.”

“I mean it,” Steve pressed, leaning forward slightly. “Whoever said that- they’re lying.”

The principal exhaled through his nose patiently. “Mr. Rogers, I have no reason to assume a lie. The student in question came forward calmly, respectfully, and I can assure you they gain nothing by inventing a story of this sort.”

Steve’s pulse jumped. Bucky could see it in the way his hand gripped

his knee. “You think we’d- You think I’d-?” He stopped himself, jaw locking tight. “Sir, we didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Then perhaps,” Hargreeves said evenly, “you can explain why someone would make such a serious claim. False accusations are not taken lightly either.”

Bucky still hadn’t said a word. His mouth was dry. His heart hurt, not just from fear but from humiliation, the sharp, sick kind that twisted in his gut. His father’s voice flashed in his head. Words about pride, about manhood, about shame.

He wanted to disappear.

Steve’s voice cracked the silence again. “It’s a setup, sir. Somebody’s trying to get us in trouble. We- we didn’t do anything, alright? We were at a party, and-”

Hargreeves raised a hand, cutting him off. “That will be enough.”

Steve froze mid-sentence.

The principal leaned back in his chair. “Mr. Rogers, I admire your loyalty. I can see you mean to protect your friend. But I have been in education long enough to recognize when young men are trying to smooth over a mistake they regret.” His gaze shifted slowly to Bucky. “I don’t intend to humiliate either of you. But I cannot ignore what has been brought to my attention.”

Bucky’s stomach turned. He felt small in that chair, smaller than he had since he was a child.

Steve’s hands tightened into fists. “We’re not smoothing anything over!”

“Please lower your voice, Mr. Rogers.”

But Steve didn’t. “Sir, you don’t understand! Someone’s trying to ruin him. To ruin us. You know Howard Stark? He’s- he’s the one who told you, isn’t he?”

Hargreeves blinked once, slowly. “Mr. Stark is a respectable student. His family is well known and-”

Steve cut in, unbelieving. “Yeah, and he’s a liar! He- he hates Bucky! He’s spreading this because he saw- he thinks-” He stopped himself

before saying more, swallowing hard.

The principal's voice stayed calm, almost maddeningly so. "I will not discuss other students' personal matters with you, Mr. Rogers. The point stands. Such behavior, if true, is entirely unacceptable within this institution. You are both fortunate that I have chosen a measured response."

Bucky finally looked up, eyes rimmed red. "W-what kind of response?"

"I've decided," Hargreeves said, his tone almost pitying, "not to pursue disciplinary action that could risk your futures. Displacement would serve neither of you nor your families. Instead, I will be contacting your parents directly. They have the right to know about this matter and deal with it."

Bucky's breath hitched audibly.

Steve's face drained of color. "You can't! You can't do that," he stammered, shaking his head. "You can't tell our parents- his parents! Please, sir, you can't."

"I can," Hargreeves replied, folding his hands. "And I will. This institution will not intervene further unless I find reason to believe this behavior continues. Consider this a mercy, gentlemen."

Mercy.

The word sounded like a threat.

Bucky's fingers dug into his knee, knuckles white, chest tight and rising fast. He could barely breathe. Every nerve in his body felt like it was on fire, panic building up in his chest.

Steve leaned forward again, voice trembling with rage. "You don't know James' parents, sir! You'll ruin him!"

Hargreeves's tone went cold. "That will be enough, Mr. Rogers."

For a long, horrible moment, none of them spoke. Only the ticking of the clock filled the air, each second heavier than the last.

Principal Hargreeves's voice had gone quiet when he said it. "Your parents are already on their way."

For a moment, neither boy seemed to understand what that meant. The words hung in the air, heavy and final. Then Bucky's stomach

dropped. Steve froze in his chair.

“You- you called them already?” Steve said, voice cracking with disbelief.

Hargreeves simply folded his hands on the desk. “I believe transparency is the only way forward.”

Bucky wanted to disappear. But unfortunately, it wasn’t long before the knock came on the door.

“Come in,” Hargreeves said.

The door opened, and Sarah Rogers stepped in first. She was still in her white nurse’s uniform, her cap slightly crooked, her hands red from scrubbing and sterilizing. She looked furious and worried all at once. “Principal Hargreeves,” she said tightly, “I came as fast as I could. Your secretary said it was urgent. If this isn’t as serious as it sounded, I’ve left my ward short-staffed.”

Her gaze darted immediately to her son. “Steve? What happened? Are you hurt?”

Steve shook his head. “I’m fine, Ma. Really.”

Then she saw Bucky. Pale, trembling, his eyes down, his hands gripping his knees so tightly the knuckles had gone white. Sarah frowned. “Bucky? What’s going on?”

Before either boy could answer, Hargreeves stood, smoothing his jacket. “Mrs. Rogers, thank you for coming so promptly. Please, have a seat. The Barneses will be here shortly.”

Sarah’s eyes narrowed. “The Barneses?”

And then, the sound of footsteps in the hallway. Heavy, purposeful ones. The door opened again.

George Barnes filled the doorway first. He looked every inch the Army office worker he was. Pressed suit, badges gleaming. His jaw was locked tight, his expression unreadable. Behind him came Valeria Barnes, her floral dress neat and proper, lace gloves still on as though she’d been pulled straight from her classroom without time to think. Her dark hair was pinned in a soft twist, and her eyes, those deep blue, kind eyes that so often looked at her son with quiet fondness, displayed nervousness.

“What’s this nonsense about?” George demanded. His gaze cut to Bucky, who sat frozen in his chair, eyes rimmed red though no tears had fallen yet. “You in trouble, James?”

Bucky opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He shook his head once, but the motion was weak. He didn’t dare to look up at his father.

“Principal Hargreeves,” George said curtly, nodding once. “We came as requested. What’s this about?”

“I apologize,” the principal said, stepping out from behind his desk. “I know this has disrupted your workday. But the matter is urgent, and I believe it’s best to address it immediately rather than risk gossip spreading.”

Valeria frowned faintly. “Gossip?”

Sarah Rogers crossed her arms. “Someone better start explaining.”

Hargreeves cleared his throat. “I regret to inform you that a report was made this morning concerning your sons. A student witnessed what they described as inappropriate behavior between the two of them. Behavior of an intimate nature.”

Valeria’s brow furrowed. “What kind of behavior?”

Hargreeve’s lips thinned. “Homosexual activity.”

The word was like a match to gasoline.

For a heartbeat, the room was silent. Then everything seemed to explode.

Sarah’s hand flew to her mouth, though her eyes flashed more with anger than shock. “You pulled me off a twelve-hour shift to talk about this?”

Valeria went still. Her gloved hands trembled slightly, and she turned toward her son as if she couldn’t stop herself. “James?” she whispered, her voice thin, barely there.

Bucky’s throat locked up. He stared at his lap, unable to speak.

George’s face darkened. He straightened to his full height, the anger boiling up quickly inside him. “You’re saying- What exactly are you implying, Principal?”

“I’m not implying, Mr. Barnes,” Hargreeves said carefully. “I’m relaying what was reported to me.”

George’s nostrils flared. “This is a school, not a police station. You think I’m going to let you ruin my boy’s reputation over the word of some student?”

“Please understand,” the principal replied evenly, “that I am handling this privately, to protect both young men from public disgrace.”

Valeria was still staring at Bucky. Pale as porcelain, her eyes glistening. She swallowed hard, her voice barely audible. “James, is this true?”

He didn’t look up or speak. He couldn’t. His hands shook in his lap, and his chest ached like he was trying to hold in a scream.

Sarah looked from the principal to the boys, then to the Barneses. “You mean to tell me you dragged all of us here to scold two seventeen-year-olds for- for what, exactly? For caring about each other? For being curious?”

“Ms. Rogers,” Hargreeves said, tone clipped, “this is not about judgment. It’s about appropriateness.”

She gave a short, humorless laugh. “Appropriateness? They’re boys. Teenagers. You act like they’ve committed a crime.”

George turned sharply toward her. “You call that normal? Two boys-?” He stopped himself mid-sentence, voice tightening. “Keep your opinions to yourself, Sarah. You don’t know what’s best for my son.”

Sarah’s expression hardened. “I know fear when I see it, George. And that boy of yours-” she pointed at Bucky, voice softening, “he looks terrified, not sinful.”

Valeria’s gloved hand went to her mouth. “George, please,” she murmured, eyes still locked on Bucky.

But George’s face had gone from red to pale and back again, his jaw trembling under the weight of suppressed rage. “What the hell is this?” His voice boomed so loud that Steve flinched in his chair. He turned on Hargreeves, pointing a finger toward him. “Nobody else knows about this, do they?”

“No, of course not,” Hargreeves replied. “As a matter of discretion, I only called you-”

“Good. It stays that way.” George cut the man of shamelessly. “This doesn’t leave this office. Do you hear me? My son will not be branded a… a deviant. Not in this community.”

“Of course,” Hargreeves said quickly. “That is precisely why I asked you all to come. I intend to keep the matter discreet.”

Bucky was shaking now, small tremors running through his hands. He couldn’t look at any of them. Not his father, not his mother, not even Steve. His throat hurt. His heart felt like it was beating too fast to survive.

Valeria reached toward him instinctively, her gloved hand hovering just short of his arm. “James?”

He flinched back before she could touch him.

And that tiny motion. That involuntary flinch told everyone in the room exactly how scared he was.

Sarah Rogers had enough.

She rose from her seat, the legs of her chair scraping across the tile. The movement startled everyone, even the principal looked up sharply as her small frame straightened, her presence quiet but unbudging.

“They’re seventeen,” she said, her voice steady, though her fingers twisted the strap of her worn leather purse. “They’ve known each other since they were little. They’re discovering love, discovering themselves. There is nothing-” her gaze cut to Hargreeves like a blade, “sick about that.”

George Barnes turned his head toward her, his eyes burning in anger. “Don’t you dare defend this,” he spat. “Your boy’s the one who dragged mine into this filth. No son of mine-”

“Dragged him?” Sarah snapped, stepping closer before she could stop herself. Her voice rose, tense and trembling with fury. “You think James isn’t his own person? That this is some kind of trap Steve laid? They’re boys, George! Your boy made his choice, same as mine.”

George barked a bitter laugh, one that held no humor. “Choice? There’s no choice here. This is weakness. This is shame.” He pointed a

finger toward Steve, who sat frozen in his chair, his hands balled into white-knuckled fists. “This is what happens when a boy grows up without a proper father in the house. Soft. Sickly. Wrong. And now he’s poisoned my son.”

Steve flinched as if struck. His breath hitched, and his throat felt like it was closing.

Sarah’s hands shook at her sides, but her voice was steel. “Don’t you dare talk about my boy that way.” Her voice cracked once, not from fear, but from the love and anger. “He’s stronger than you’ll ever be. And if your only answer to your son’s heart is to beat him into a soldier, then maybe you don’t deserve him.”

“Enough!” Principal Hargreeves barked, slamming his palm against the desk, the sound echoing through the small office. “This is not a debate. This is about discipline. About preventing scandal.”

But the words meant nothing now.

George’s voice rose again, rough and booming, his temper spilling out unchecked. “Discipline is exactly what’s needed! You coddle these boys, and this is what you get. Sin. Shame. You think I’ll have neighbors whispering about my son?” He turned toward Valeria sharply. “You hear this, Valeria? This is what happens when you fill his head with softness, with kind words, with church nonsense instead of spine.”

Valeria startled at the sudden accusation, pressing a trembling hand to her chest. “George, please.” Her voice faltered, her accent thickening as her composure cracked. “Not here, not now.”

But she turned to her son then, her expression collapsing into shock and sorrow.
“James,” she whispered, voice breaking on his name. “Tell me it isn’t true. Please. Tell me this isn’t- that this isn’t what they’re saying.”

Bucky’s eyes stayed glued to the floor. His lips parted once, but no sound came out.

“James, look at me.” Her tone trembled, caught between pleading and disbelief. “You go to church every Sunday. You pray with me. You- you know this isn’t what God wants.”

George scoffed. “God? You think God’s listening? He’s turned his back the second this started. The boy’s gone astray because you let him.”

“I let him?” Valeria’s composure snapped, tears brimming in her eyes. “He’s my son! I would never-”

But George was already pacing, anger radiating off him. “We’ll deal with this at home,” he muttered, his voice low and dangerous. “And you,” he growled, pointing at Bucky without even looking at him, “you better pray your name doesn’t leave this office.”

“Enough!” Sarah’s voice cut through the chaos. She stepped between George and the boys, small but fierce, one hand extended protectively toward Steve and Bucky both. “You’ll not speak to him like that. Not here. Not while I’m standing.”

“Stay out of it, Sarah,” George barked.

“You think I could?” she shot back. “When you’re tearing your boy apart right in front of everyone? Look at him, George. Look.”

And for the first time, George’s eyes flicked down.

Bucky sat small and hunched in his chair, shoulders trembling, his fingers twisted in his trouser fabric, knuckles bloodless. His face was pale except for the bright flush streaking his cheeks, and his breath came too fast. Short, sharp, shallow.

Valeria took a step closer, reaching out as tears finally broke over her lashes. “James, my dear boy… please.” Her hand rubbed his shoulder, hesitant, helpless. “Just tell us it isn’t true. Say it, and this all goes away.”

But Bucky couldn’t. His throat locked tight. The air in his chest turned to stone.

Sarah’s voice softened, breaking through the noise. “He doesn’t need to say anything. You can see he’s terrified.”

George’s glare snapped to her again. “Terrified? He should be terrified. He’s shamed this family.”

Sarah folded her arms, chin lifting. “No. You’re the one shaming it.”

The words hung there.

Hargreeves tried again to speak, but his voice was swallowed by the rising tide of anger and grief.

Valeria’s lips moved in silent prayer, her fingers clutching her small

silver crucifix necklace through the lace of her gloves. “Dumnezeule,” she whispered under her breath. “Ajută-ne.” *~God, help us.~*

George turned toward the desk, demanding answers about punishment, about displacement, about secrecy. His voice was low and rumbling, Sarah’s higher tones clashing against his. The office was filled with it.

And at the center of it, Bucky’s world started to spin. His pulse thundered in his ears. His mother’s sobs and his father’s rage blurred into one awful hum. Steve’s hand brushed his arm subtly, a small, grounding touch, but even that felt too far away.

He couldn’t breathe.

The knot in his throat snapped.

“Stop!”

The word tore out of him like a sob.

Everything froze. Sarah mid-breath, Valeria mid-prayer, George mid-rant.

Bucky’s tears spilled over, hot and heavy, streaking down his flushed cheeks. His whole body trembled as he pressed his shaking hands against his chest, trying to hold himself together.

“I can’t- I can’t listen to this anymore,” he gasped, voice cracking open. “Please. Please just stop.”

Silence filled the office. Heavy. Suffocating.

—

The Barnes’ living room was silent except for the sound of pacing feet.

Bucky sat on the couch. The same old couch where, just last week, he’d sat beside his mother shelling peas for dinner. His eyes were red-rimmed, lashes heavy from tears that refused to stop entirely. He wasn’t even sure when he’d last blinked.

Across the room, his father paced. George’s Army uniform still clung to him, pressed, precise, the buttons gleaming in the light. His jaw was clenched tight, a muscle twitching near the corner every few seconds. The sound of his feet on the hardwood, step, turn, step, turn, filled the room.

Valeria sat beside Bucky, her gloved hand resting on her knee. The fine lace of her dress rustled softly when she moved. Her face, still pale from the ordeal at school. She drew in a breath, slow, shaky, before slipping one glove off finger by finger. Then she turned toward her son.

“James,” she said softly.

He didn’t answer.

She reached out, her hand cool against his hot cheek. “You can tell us that it’s wrong. I know it’s been a hard day. People say things that aren’t true.” Her voice was gentle, comforting, motherly. The same tone she used when he didn’t feel his best. “You’re a good boy. I know you are.”

Her thumb brushed at a tear on his cheek, and the touch almost broke him.

“You don’t need to be afraid,” she went on. “We will find who lied about you and your friend, yes? Whoever did this will face the consequences. The truth will come out.”

Still, he didn’t speak. His gaze stayed fixed somewhere on the carpet, on a frayed thread that he kept tracing with his eyes, over and over.

Maybe it hurt so much because it wasn’t a lie. He wished it were one.

Valeria sighed softly, mistaking his silence for shame. “You like girls, my son. You dream of a wife, yes? A pretty one, who will care for you when you come home from work. You always told me you wanted a house with a garden.” Her smile trembled. “That is what you want, isn’t it?”

The clock ticked.

His father kept pacing.

And Bucky’s throat ached. He wanted to speak, but his tongue felt thick, useless.

When he finally did, it was barely more than a whisper. “Mama…”

George stopped pacing.

Valeria leaned closer, hope sparking in her eyes. “Yes, my love?”

Bucky swallowed hard. “I…” He breathed once, twice, trying to hold his voice steady. “I love Steve.”

The room froze.

For a moment, it was like even the air forgot how to move.

Valeria blinked, as if she hadn’t heard him right. Her hand stilled on his cheek. “No,” she said softly, shaking her head. “No, you don’t.”

Bucky’s lips trembled. “I do.”

Her hand fell down. “No,” she repeated, firmer now. “You can’t.”

“Mama, please.”

“Don’t say it again.” Her voice broke this time, the words tumbling out between uneven breaths. “Please, James, don’t.”

But Bucky couldn’t stop now. It was as if something inside him had snapped, something that had been suppressed for too long. The tears came again, spilling down his face as he spoke, the words unsteady, but real. “I love him, Ma. I do. I tried not to. I prayed, I did, but-” He shook his head, words choking off. “I can’t help it.”

Valeria drew back. Her gloved hand flew to her mouth, muffling a sound. Partly a sob, partly disbelief. She stood abruptly, turning away, one hand clutching her chest through the fabric of her dress. Her shoulders shook as she whispered rapid, fractured Romanian prayers under her breath.

George had stopped pacing entirely. He stood by the fireplace, his hands rigid at his sides, his face unreadable. Too still, too composed in that dangerous way that meant something was about to crack.

“Say that again,” he said quietly.

Bucky looked up, startled.

“Say it again,” George barked, louder now. “Say it, boy, and look me in the eye this time.”

Bucky flinched, his breath stuttering. “I- I love him.”

The sound that left George’s throat wasn’t quite a growl, but close. “God help me,” he muttered, dragging a hand down his face. “You don’t mean that. You’re confused. That Rogers kid filled your head

with nonsense."

Valeria turned back, still crying quietly, her words a desperate whisper. "Please, James, tell him you didn't mean it. Tell him, and this will be over. We can fix this."

But Bucky just shook his head. Small, desperate, miserable.

"You will not speak to that boy again. Do you hear me?"

Bucky didn't answer.

"James." His father's tone cracked like a whip.

Bucky's voice was barely audible. "He didn't do anything wrong."

George's fist came down hard on the mantel, rattling the framed photograph of their family. Bucky at twelve, smiling wide beside Becca and their parents, all happy and unknowing.

Valeria gasped. "George."

But George's attention was fixed on his son, the anger boiling just beneath his skin. "You will forget this," he said, each word clipped and burning. "You'll straighten up, and you'll keep your mouth shut. Do you understand me?"

Bucky's tears fell silently, but he nodded, even if it wasn't really in agreement. Just surrender.

His throat hurt from holding back the next wave of tears, but he couldn't bring himself to move, couldn't even breathe right.

George Barnes finally exhaled. A sound that was less a sigh and more the release of a man trying to wrestle his own anger down into something that looked like reason. He pinched the bridge of his nose, eyes closing for a moment. When he spoke again, his voice was low, measured, almost too calm.

"You'll never see that boy again."

Bucky's head snapped up, eyes wide. "Dad-"

"Not another word." George's voice hardened. "You're done with him. You hear me? Done."

"Please-"

“I said enough!” George barked, and the sharpness of it made Valeria flinch. “You’ll stop with this nonsense. You’ll focus on what matters from now on. Your future, your family’s name, and your responsibilities as a man.”

Bucky’s lips trembled. “Steve-”

His father cut him off with a glare that froze the rest of the sentence in his throat. “Don’t say his name in this house again.”

Silence. Only the clock ticking, again and again.

Then George let out a long, weary breath and straightened his shoulders. “Alright,” he said after a moment, his tone shifting from irritation to something colder. Something that sounded like finality. “I was going to wait until you finished school next year… but it seems you need a firmer hand sooner than that.”

Valeria’s head snapped toward him, startled. “George,” she whispered, her accent thickening around his name. She knew what this was about.

Bucky’s brow furrowed, fear creeping up his spine. “What do you mean?”

His father didn’t look at him right away. He stepped to the sideboard, picked up his untouched glass of water, and took a big sip. Then he turned, meeting his son’s gaze again.

“You’ll finish out your last month of school here,” he said, voice flat. “And then you’re leaving for Ohio.”

Bucky blinked, not understanding. “Ohio?”

“You’ll stay with my parents,” George said. “Your grandparents. They’ll set you straight.”

“Dad- what? No-”

“I’ve already talked to them before, about sending you there after graduation. Seems there’s no reason to wait any longer.”

Valeria sat back down slowly, her hands trembling in her lap. “George…”

He didn’t stop. “You’ll help them on the farm, learn to work like a man should. And when you turn eighteen in March, you’ll join the

Army. It's in your blood, son. My father did his part. His father before him. Every man in this family has. And you will, too."

Bucky just stared at him, eyes wide and wet. "You can't be serious."

"I'm dead serious," George said quietly. "You'll serve your country and maybe, God willing, you'll finally learn what kind of man you're supposed to be."

"I don't want to!" The words tore out of him before he could stop them. "I don't want to go to Ohio. I want to graduate here with my friends! With Steve!"

George's eyes flashed.

"And study engineering," Bucky continued, voice shaking but stronger now, desperate. "I want to go to college, Dad. I could help. I could invent things, build things that protect people. You said once that brains matter too, remember? Not everyone needs to fight-"

"Enough." George's voice was low, final. "You don't get to choose, James. You lost that right when you decided to throw your future away by chasing after that boy."

Valeria looked up suddenly, tears rolling down her sharp cheekbones. "George, please. He's too young."

He turned to her. "And what do you expect me to do, Valeria? Pretend this didn't happen? Let him keep shaming us?"

She pressed a hand to her mouth. "He's our son."

"He's my son," George said firmly. "And it's my job to make sure he turns into a man, not-" He stopped himself, jaw locking tight, unwilling to finish the sentence.

The silence that followed was worse than shouting.

Bucky's chest rose and fell rapidly. "You're punishing me for loving someone," he whispered, voice breaking.

George's reply came out in a near growl. "I'm punishing you for forgetting who you are."

Valeria covered her face with her hands. "Please," she whispered through her fingers, "please don't fight."

Bucky's voice shook as he turned toward her, eyes wide and pleading. "Ma, please! Tell him I can stay. Tell him- tell him I'll do better. I'll- I'll go to church every day if I have to, I'll-"

But she shook her head before he could finish. Slowly, her hands fell from her face. Her eyes were glassy, distant, her voice almost gone. "I can't, James."

"Mama-"

"I can't defend this." Her voice wobbled, cracking with every word. "I tried. But you said it yourself. You love… him." Her lips trembled. "I don't know what to do with that."

He stared at her as if the air had been ripped from his lungs.

George exhaled again, quieter this time, as though the fight had drained out of him. "You'll pack your things when the term ends," he said. "You'll go to Ohio. You'll help my father, and you'll enlist when you're old enough. That's final."

Bucky's eyes filled again. "Please don't send me away," he whispered.

His father only shook his head. "You'll thank me someday. The Army will beat this foolishness out of you. Make a man out of you, finally."

Bucky flinched like he'd been struck.

George looked away, jaw tight. "And don't think I don't want to beat the living daylights out of you right now," he muttered under his breath. "But it seems that hasn't done much good so far."

That was it. The words that cut through him completely.

Bucky stood abruptly. His hands were shaking so badly he had to press them against his sides just to steady them.

He looked from his father to his mother. It was her betrayal that really hurt. She didn't protect him, didn't even try like she usually did. She just gave up on him as if he were worth nothing.

"Can I go?" he asked.

George gave a curt nod.

Bucky didn't wait another second. He turned and walked toward the stairs, each step feeling heavier than the last. He didn't cry until he

reached his room, until he closed the door and pressed his back to it, sliding down to the floor.

His father's words still echoed in the back of his head, but worse than that was the silence that followed. Nobody was here to help him. Nobody was going to help him.

He buried his face in his hands and wished he could disappear. Sink into the floor right here.

In thirtyone days, he would be gone. And maybe he would never come back again.

Chapter End Notes

> Kinda off topic, but I wanna use this opportunity to tell you all to watch Kings the series from 2009 with Sebastian Stan as a sad gay prince. I love that series so much, and it inspired this fic in many ways, such as the scene with Valeria on the couch <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!